LGBTQ Educators' Perceptions of School Climate: A Case Study of One Rural Southeast Georgia School District

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ABSTRACT

This study was an exploration of the life and career experiences of veteran LGBTQ educators who work or have worked at an identified Southeast Georgia public school district. Based on the National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) educators reported a negative school climate and feared harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known. To better understand the fears and strategies used by veteran LGBTQ educators living and working in Southeast Georgia, data collected came from a series of three interviews with five LGBTQ educators having more than five years of experience in the field of public education. The research approach was a qualitative case study with queer theory and the bioecological theory of school climate as theoretical frameworks. Data analysis consisting of memos, written narratives, and comparisons revealed distinct findings. First, veteran LGBTQ educators possessed a passion for education that reached back into their K-12 education. Second, fear of harassment by fellow faculty and community members eclipsed fear of termination or contract nonrenewal. Third, veteran LGBTQ educators at the identified school district used avoidance, accommodation, deflection, and reciprocity to manage their sexual orientation knowledge. Additionally, they separated themselves from the community, adapted gender performativity, and strove to outperform others as strategies to assure a successful career. Finally, LGBTQ educators wanted some degree of communication from administration accepting and protecting them from homophobic allegations by the community and discrimination from within the system.

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Becky Logue my beautiful wife. You picked me up and brushed me off and told me I could do anything. You are my light.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The concept of school climate dates back to the early 21st century, emerging from research based on organizational climate. School climate is the primary foundation upon which teachers, students, and other stakeholders base connection within the identified educational institution and is the invisible element of school felt by all (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018). Three factors of organizational climate strongly influence the current ideology of school climate.

1. Viewing the climate as a phenomenon.

2. The climate is the underlying construct, the indicators for which can be the perceptions of members of the organization regarding norms and practices.

3. The climate is a phenomenon that holds constant across time, not readily changed by hiring or introducing new students but through significant reforms and behavioral practices (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018).

According to the National School Climate Center (NSCC), the primary determinants of school climate are (a) organization as represented by the vision of educational leaders, (b) staff/faculty relationships with students and each other, (c) students' relationships with each other and their engagement within the school, (d) families' values, beliefs, practices, and regard for adults, and (e) community values, beliefs, and practices outside of the school environment (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). School climate also presents as the perceptions by individuals within the school environment of safety, teaching/learning,

relationships, and environment/structure. Regardless, school climate is the essential and primary foundation teachers, students, and other stakeholders require to establish a connection to the school and educational system. Moreover, it is vital to student achievement and the 21st-century workplace (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013).

Georgia's Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES)(Georgia Department of Education [GaDOE], 2020) includes Standard 2, which helps to identify schools in which administrators support their teachers in an open climate. The school environment should facilitate sincere relationships among all stakeholders, providing the trust necessary for teachers to take risks to improve instruction and offer input into professional decisions. Adherence to Standard 2 results in improved school climates and increased job satisfaction (GaDOE, 2020; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; McCarley, Peters, & Decman, 2016).

There is an enduring connection between school climate and prejudice against lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals within the educational system. After the 1930s, the perception was that single female educators were lesbian, with those identified as spinsters often the target of government organizations and politicians tasked with ridding the system of homosexuality (Blount, 1996). LGBTQ individuals in the field of education acknowledge that homophobic behavior and harassment help to create a negative culture that can, at times, be hostile and unsafe (Irwin, 2002). Despite recent advances in the equal treatment of the LGBTQ community, LGBTQ-identifying educators continue to report high levels of homophobic language and harassment, especially within the Southern United States (Wright & Smith, 2015).

In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage. Shortly after, the Obama administration issued a directive allowing transgender

students to use restrooms matching their gender identities. Both actions brought the discussion of sexual orientation, gender identity, and LGBTQ equality to the forefront of American consciousness, spurring opposition from Southern conservatives (Berman, 2017). Communities in the South reacted negatively, as evidenced by Kentucky Clerk of Court Kim Davis's refusal to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and South Carolina's HB2 requiring individuals to use restrooms of their gender at birth (Higdon & Somashekhar, 2015; Zezima, 2016).

The South can be a hostile environment for LGBTQ educators and students (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Hostility-fueled homophobia was evident in Berrien County, in rural South Georgia. Mars Hallman successfully fought to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club at a Georgia high school after initial rejection by the principal and local board of education (Saunders, 2015). Within the small community of just over 19,000 residents, local conservatives gathered more than 1,500 signatures to protest Hallman's attempts. The small community attracted the attention of Westboro Baptist Church, known for radical homophobic hate speech, which, along with community members, surrounded the school, demanding rejection of the GSA and condemning the LGBTQ community.

School administrators are responsible for creating a positive school climate that provides a vision and mission for all students' education. Providing support for LGBTQ teachers is an essential part of creating a diverse and multicultural climate, with safe areas for bullied LGBTQ students and high-performing classrooms. School psychology professionals have emphasized the use of collaboration and consultation that targets adults, such as parents, teachers, and administrators, to provide a school environment better prepared to meet all stakeholders' needs (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, & Eklund, 2015). Creating such an environment in the rural South can be particularly difficult, as LGBTQ-identifying individuals in those communities report

higher incidences of discrimination and fewer connections with the LGBTQ community at large (Swank, Frost, & Fahs, 2012). Although the focus of LGBTQ issues in education is on students, LGBTQ faculty also endure homophobic behaviors in the rural South (Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2016; McCready et al., 2013; Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Based on the National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate, LGBTQ educators reported a negative school climate and feared harassment and firing should their LGBTQ status becoming known.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if identified LGBTQ veteran faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known, and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the life and career experiences of identified LGBTQ veteran educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district?

RQ2: Do identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known?

RQ3: If identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination, what strategies have they used to manage their careers?

Significance

Given data indicating that a significant number of rural Southern LGBTQ educators hold a negative perception of school climate, school leaders could benefit from an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of this population (Gay, Lesbian Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2019; Wright & Smith, 2015). This study focused on one school system within rural Southeast Georgia to explore how veteran LGBTQ educators with over five years' experience reported positive relationships and summative Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) evaluations of Level III or above. Also investigated was how these individuals perceived school climate, including harassment, job security, and sense of safety, to understand mechanisms and coping strategies used by successful LGBTQ educators in a rural South Georgia school district.

In the early 20th century, administrators set the tone for the school (Cubberley, 1916). Feldvebel (1981) stated, "Children learn much in the way of attitudes, values, concepts of justice, etc., from the structures and relationships that they observe and experience in the school" (p. 6). Specifically, district leadership and school administration lead the way for the development of school climate. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of why and how successful LGBTQ educators navigate a socially conservative rural South Georgia school climate can provide insight into improving school climate for LGBTQ educators living and working in rural South Georgia.

Findings from this research study may inform local education agencies (LEAs), school administrators, and community and business leaders in rural South Georgia of policies and practices to address school climate for LGBTQ educators and improve School Climate Star Ratings (SCSRs). The findings from this study can also benefit regional educational service agencies servicing rural school districts with regard to professional development lessons and

cultural competency workshops addressing the concerns of LGBTQ educators and students within similar rural regions of Georgia. Furthermore, national organizations, such as GLSEN, could benefit from the detailed experiences and perceptions of rural South Georgia LGBTQ educators, as presented in this focused qualitative case study.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study is comprised queer theory and the bioecological theory of school climate (see Figure 1). Queer theory came to prominence in the 1990s, highlighting the experiences of individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Lauretis identified the term in 1991 based on postmodern feminism and queer studies. The premise was that homosexuality should no longer have the perception of being marginal compared to the larger heterosexual majority (Jagose, 1996). Queer theory is not a way to diminish the individual. Rather, the theory is a means to understand the cultural and political means of suppression through the experiences of those LGBTQ individuals. Queer theory is a poststructuralist critical theory that problematizes how institutions, such as public schools, normalize heterosexual behavior (Jagose, 1996). Queer identity is at the core of the LGBTQ educator in Figure 1.

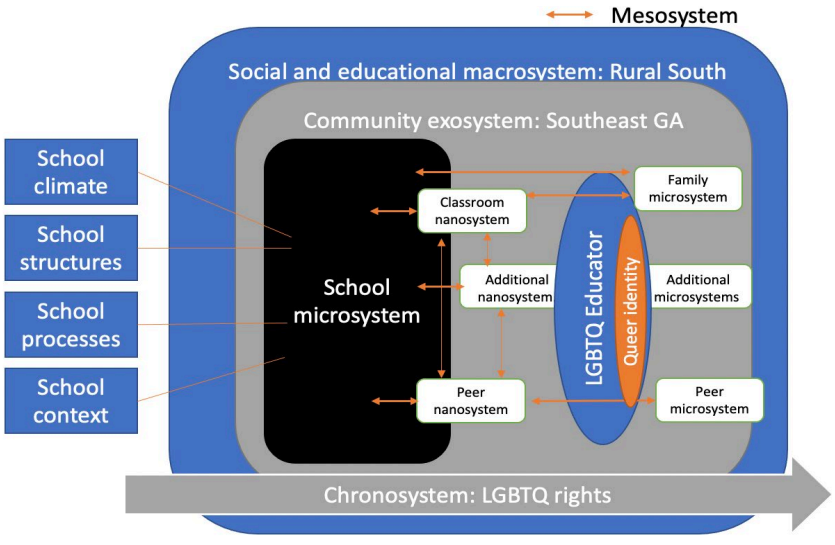

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework with Queer Theory adapted from Rudastill et al. (2018).

School Climate

The bioecological theory is an approach to view school climate through five systems: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono- (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem is the context of the family, school, peers, and neighborhood, as represented by the combined perceptions of its members (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Teachers' views of conflict, collaboration, and academic expression are central to the formation of school climate within the microsystem (Rudasill et al., 2018). The mesosystem consists of interactions and linking microsystems, such as parent-teacher conferences, parent-teacher organizations, and business school partnerships (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Microsystems may provide mutual reinforcement of common beliefs and values; however, such conflicts could leave teachers, parents, and student microsystems at odds (Rudasill et al., 2018). Exosystem factors influence school climate through constraints or opportunities from outside the school, as in policies of local boards of education or community organizations. Lastly, chronosystems can affect school climate via the timing of life events and the era in which individuals live (Rudasill et al., 2018; Taylor & Gebre, 2016).

The bioecological model offers an inductive approach suited for discovery rather than verification and is effective when examining employee workplace well-being in addition to school climate (Bone, 2015); therefore, it is an appropriate model to explore LGBTQ educators. The combination of queer theory and school climate, as presented by the NSCC and bioecological theory, encompasses a systems view of school climate. This combination provides a framework for those researching LGBTQ educators to reject restrictions placed on the LGBTQ community and generate unique results (Bone, 2015; Rudasill et al., 2018; Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Furthermore, the combination serves as a structure for the analysis of institutions and

perceptions that limit LGBTQ teachers' and students' issues in the U.S. K-12 school system (Britzman, 1998; Shelton & Lester, 2018).

Literature

There is a long history of homophobia within the U.S. public education system, which has oppressed LGBTQ individuals through public institutions, such as LEAs and local and state government agencies (Blount, 2000; Graves, 2009; Harbeck, 1997). School administrators have served as the de facto enforcers of sexuality and gender norms since the early 19th century (Blount, 2003; Lugg, 2006). Single female teachers and effeminate male teachers found themselves the target of groups, such as Florida's Legislative Investigation Committee, that revoked teacher certificates on the basis of moral turpitude from 1958 to 1964 (Blount, 2000; Graves, 2009).

Wright and Smith conducted surveys of LGBTQ educators in 2007, 2011, and 2017. Study participants were LGBTQ paraprofessionals, teachers, counselors, and principals from all grade levels. In the three studies, Wright and Smith surveyed more than 500 educators from across the United States. The purpose of the studies was to examine LGBTQ educators' perceptions of school climate, including safety, policy support, and school homophobia concerning outness (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). Despite advancements since the first national survey in 2007, one-third of LGBTQ educators continued to report a hostile school climate. Consequently, many were not out due to negative consequences regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity, and those who have often embraced the positive aspect of being a role model for LGBTQ students (Wright et al., 2019).

McKenna-Buchanan et al., (2015) found that LGBTQ educators use four strategies when disclosing or concealing their sexual orientation to students: (a) reciprocity to reveal their sexual

orientation mutually, (b) ambiguity to allow multiple interpretations of sexual orientation, (c) deflection to ignore question regarding sexual orientation, and (d) avoidance to divert conversations of sexual orientation altogether.

Personal Experience

My experiences in rural South Georgia's public education system as a student and teacher drove my decision for the study. My philosophical worldview is consistent with the transformative worldview, which "focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized or disenfranchised" (Creswell, 2014, p. 10). The transformative worldview is consistent with my role as a public school administrator, in which I am responsible for ensuring equitable education for all students and an equal work environment for all faculty and staff. This worldview allows me a degree of understanding regarding the unique conservative culture present in rural South Georgia. During my tenure as a teacher at the middle and high school levels, I have had the opportunity to teach, mentor, and advocate for many LGBTQ students. In 2008, I read for the first time a GLESN survey of student climate and immediately began addressing homophobic attitudes within my classroom. Consequently, LGBTQ students began confiding and voicing their concerns regarding the attitudes of fellow students and parents as to their sexual orientation. Over ten years, I have addressed concerns of dress, identity, exclusion, and homelessness experienced by students within my classroom.

Summary of Methodology

A case study approach was appropriate to understand the lived experiences of discrimination perceived by LGBTQ educators in rural South Georgia. Using the qualitative method allowed for greater in-depth examinations of LGBTQ individuals' backgrounds, experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes than a quantitative study could provide.

A case study is a means to explore how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and attribute meaning to experiences (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

Participants selection was via purposeful sampling from the population of 262 educators at an identified rural South Georgia school system, with the intention to identify a minimum of five LGBTQ educators representative of the LGBTQ educator population of 2.5% (Creswell, 2014; Williams Institute, n.d.). To address the success of LGBTQ educators, only those with five or more years of experience in the field of education and summative TKES evaluations of Level III were eligible (GaDOE, 2020). I use a semistructured interview protocol comprised of researcher-developed open-ended questions inspired by the research questions, school climate, and literature. All interviews followed Seidman's (2013) process of three 90-minute interviews. The semistructured format and common interview questions helped provide continuity throughout the interview process. The interviews were the primary data source, with audio-recording, transcribing, and coding via MAXQDA qualitative software leading to conceptual themes. Additional data came from documents, including LEA policies and 5-year plans and other public documents found to be pertinent to the study.

Limitations

Transferability was a possible limitation. The scope of this study was the experiences of LGBTQ educators working in an identified public school system in rural Southeast Georgia and their perceptions of homophobia, harassment, success, and strategies. Generalization in research refers to the transferability of study results or conclusions to other accounts based on individuals, settings, times, or institutions other than those directly studied (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to the larger population outside of this study's geographic location, grade level, and context. However, the study provided a deeper understanding of the unique

experiences of workplace homophobia and discrimination of successful LGBTQ educators within a rural Georgia school district.

Two other potential limitations of the study were researcher bias and reactivity. Maxwell (2013) outlined researcher bias and reactivity as two main threats to qualitative research validity. Researcher bias can occur when a researcher selects data that fit preexisting theories, goals, or preconceptions or otherwise stand out to the investigator (Maxwell, 2013). I used memos to expand on interview notes, as Seidman (2013) suggested, allowing me to establish follow-up questions to clarify and ensure the participants' intentions. I provided each participant with a transcript and solicited feedback with the presumption that all feedback was truthful and precise; regardless, I cannot rule out inaccuracies by the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

According to Maxwell (2013), reactivity is the researcher's influence on the setting or individual participants. The eradication of researcher influence is impossible; thus, the goal of a qualitative study is "not to eliminate this influence but to understand it and to use it productively" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125). Therefore, I used open-ended questions and made a conscious effort not to share my opinions or experiences during the interview process.

Finally, the main limitation of this study of LGBTQ educators is the sensitive nature of rather intimate issues about individuals' private lives. There may be a difference between participants' truths and what they chose to tell. To reduce anxiety, participants selected a comfortable and mutually agreed-upon site for the interviews., shared the purpose of the study, and assured participants that the researcher was an ally.

Chapter Summary

Despite recent advances in the establishment of equal rights for LGBTQ educators, studies indicate that LGBTQ educators and students continue to hold negative perceptions of school climate (Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). This qualitative case study was an exploration of the lived experiences of LGBTQ educators teaching and mentoring students within an identified school district in a rural, conservative area of South Georgia. Queer theory, the bioecological theory of school climate, and the literature provided a framework to investigate LGBTQ educators' perceptions of school climate. Collected data were from interviews with LGBTQ educators, publicly available documents, and system policies.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore how successful LGBTQ educators perceived school climate and coping strategies within a rural South Georgia school district. The secondary purpose was to understand what policies and practices could help produce a positive school climate for LGBTQ faculty, as determined by a case study of LGBTQ educators' lived experiences through interviews and observations.

Definition of Key Terms

Butch. An adjective used to describe qualities typically or deliberately masculine (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Cisgender individuals express the biological gender at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Gender. The physiological or biological characteristics that define male and female (Merriam-Webster, 2020a).

Gender expression. The outward appearance of gender identity that is usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut, or voice. The expression may or may not conform to social norms (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Gender identity. One's concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither. Gender identity can be the same or different from the sex assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Hostile school climate. Evidenced by disruptive, threatening, or harassing situations that directly or indirectly draw attention away from the learning environment (Lleras, 2008).

LGBTQ. An acronym that identifies a social group consisting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Mentor. A trusted and experienced advisor, counselor, or teacher (Merriam-Webster, 2020b).

Nonbinary. An umbrella term for people who transcend commonly held concepts of gender through their own expressions and identities (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Outing. The act of exposing someone's sexual orientation or gender identity to others without permission (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Queer. A term some people use to identify themselves with a flexible and inclusive view of gender and/or sexuality. Also used interchangeably with LGBTQ to describe a group of people. The term is also relevant in academic fields, such as queer studies or queer theory. Some people find the term offensive, whereas others embrace it as an identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

School climate. Reflects the goals, values, relationships, and learning practices of the school or organization regarding to the quality and character of school life. The personal

experiences of students, parents, and faculty are the basis for school climate (NSCC & Center for Social and Emotional Education [CSEE], 2007).

Sex. Biological and physical attributes, including external genitalia, sex chromosomes, and internal reproductive structures (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Sexual orientation. Inherent or undeniable persistent emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Straight. A slang term for heterosexuals (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Transgender individuals express the opposite gender than assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2019).

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Based on the National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate, LGBTQ educators reported negative school climates and feared harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known. The purpose of this study was to determine if identified LGBTQ veteran faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. Given data indicating that a significant number of rural Southern LGBTQ educators hold a negative perception of school climate, school leaders could benefit from an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of rural South Georgia LGBTQ educators (GLSEN, 2019; Wright & Smith, 2015). This study focused on one school system within rural Southeast Georgia to explore how successful LGBTQ educators perceived school climate, including harassment, job security, and sense of safety, to understand mechanisms and coping strategies used by successful LGBTQ educators in the district. An in-depth understanding of why and how successful LGBTQ educators navigate a socially conservative rural South Georgia school climate could provide insight into improving school climate for LGBTQ educators living and working in rural South Georgia.

A comprehensive review of existing literature was necessary to create a framework for the study. In this chapter, I investigate, summarize, and synthesize the literature intersecting school climate and LGBTQ educators. First, I discuss school climate and the benefits of creating a positive environment. Second, a discussion of the history of homophobia in education and the

between-group differences and similarities of LGBTQ individuals is necessary to understand the foundation of heterosexism in public education. Third, I present an investigation of school climate, focusing on that experienced by LGBTQ teachers. Fourth, I explore LGBTQ inclusion, including GSAs and curricula, to support LGBTQ students, educators, and diversity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of potential gaps in the literature regarding rural LGBTQ educators' perceptions of school climate.

School Climate

School climate is the essential and primary foundation upon which teachers, students, parents, and the community establish feelings of connection to the school and educational system; moreover, it is vital to student achievement and the 21st-century workplace (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018; NSCC & CSEE, 2007). Research findings indicates the impact of school climate on students' experiences, recognizing Georgia as among the first public school systems to implement an SCSR system. The state also worked with the U.S. Department of Justice in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education to develop the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Network (GaDOE, 2020; NSCC & CSEE, 2007; Thapa et al., 2013).

According to the NSCC, school climate is the quality and character of school life based on the school life experiences of students and faculty (Thapa et al., 2013). Five factors make up the primary determinates of school climate: (a) organization as represented by the vision of educational leaders, (b) staff/faculty relationships with students and each other, (c) students' relationships with each other and their engagement within the school, (d) families' values, beliefs, practices, and regard for adults, and (e) community values, beliefs, and practices outside the school environment. Four factors established and recognized by NSCC are commonly used to measure school climate and decisively affect the nature of stakeholders' perceptions of the

school environment; these are safety, teaching/learning, interpersonal/professional relationships, and environment/structure (Thapa et al., 2013).

Manning and Bucher (2005) identified a safe school as "one in which the total school climate allows students, teachers, administrators, staff, and visitors to interact in a positive, non-threatening manner that reflects the educational mission of the school while fostering personal relationships and personal growth" (p. 56). Safe schools should also focus on the social and psychological well-being of educators. The attitudes, feelings, and values create positive interpersonal relationships that enhance learning and provide a sense of security, happiness, and belonging (Sindhi, 2013). School climate starts with establishing positive relationships and respect within and among administration, teachers, students, parents, and community members (La Salle, Meyers, Varjas, & Roach, 2015; Mason, Springer, & Pugliese, 2017).

Rudasill et al. (2018) conducted a literature synthesis of school climate research using a systems view of school climate and a framework to examine complex relationships at the core of school climate. The complexity of school climate comprises six systems—the nanosystem, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—as inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Microsystems include contexts in which an individual resides, such as family, school, and community. Mesosystems comprise interactions between two microsystems, such as parent-teacher conferences, where family and school microsystems interrelate. According to Rudasill et al., nanosystems are a relatively new component of bioecological systems theory, made up of subsystems within individual schools. LGBTQ-identifying individuals are a group within the school environment, which makes them a nanosystem. Exosystems are influences outside the microsystems that individuals may experience. For example, the expectation is that teachers and students follow policies and

practices handed down by the local boards of education. Macrosystems influencing individuals' perceptions of school climate consist of the beliefs, policies, influences, and culture of the community in which the school's stakeholders exist. School climate undergoes influence by the chronosystem through the time or era of an individual's perception of school climate. For example, individuals' perceptions of school climate could change following a teacher's termination or a school shooting (Rudasill et al., 2018; Taylor & Gebre, 2016).

According to the GaDOE (2020), a school's climate can impact student achievement, and a significant factor in the development of a positive school climate is the relationships among administrators, teachers, and students. Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2012) surveyed 664 educators from 17 schools to examine how teachers' perceptions of school climate and social-emotional learning influenced their sense of stress, teaching efficacy, and job satisfaction. Using the Teachers Stress Inventory and the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale, the researchers found that school climate can impact teachers' stress, self-confidence, and job satisfaction. Negative or threatening relationships or interactions among administrators, students, and teachers within the microsystem can produce an adverse school climate and impair student achievement (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018; GaDOE, 2020; Manning & Bucher 2005). Therefore, a shift in focus from the individual student to the system or organization is necessary for school leaders to positively affect school climate (Mason, Springer, & Pugliese, 2017).

Standard 2 of the Georgia LKES established the SCSR system to ensure that school administrators throughout Georgia's public school systems create positive school climates. School administrators undergo evaluation in part on school climate, with the school subsequently awarded a school climate rating. School and administration ratings are (a) 25% student, parent, and staff surveys, assessing perceptions of support, cultural acceptance, social/civic learning, and

physical environment, (b) 25% student discipline resulting in expulsion, alternative school placement, out-of-school suspension, or in-school suspension, (c) 25% school-wide attendance rates that include average attendance for students, administrators, teachers, and staff, and (d) 25% drugs, alcohol, bullying, and dangerous incidents as indicated in student health surveys and state-reported discipline referrals (GaDOE, 2020).

Standard 2 states, "The leader promotes the success of all students by developing, advocating, and sustaining an academically rigorous, positive, and safe school climate for all stakeholders" (GaDOE, 2020, p. 8). An indicator of a leader's proficient use of LKES to work toward a positive school climate is if the individual "consistently models and collaboratively promotes high expectations, mutual respect, concern, and empathy for students, staff, parents, and community" (GaDOE, 2020, p. 24). The foundation of a positive school climate is a physically and emotionally safe environment for both teachers and students (Chirkina & Khavenson, 2018; Polat & Iskender, 2018; Smith & Shouppe, 2018).

One study used quantitative analysis to examine the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores for 31 elementary schools and 12 middle schools representing 6,000 to 7,000 elementary students and 6,000 to 7,000 middle school students during the 2013–2014 school year (Smith & Shouppe, 2018). The study authors grouped data into categories, including Title I, non-Title I, SCSR, and grade-level CRCT results. Smith and Shouppe (2018) used prediction analysis of microarrays and factorial MANOVA to analyze the data and answer two questions: (a) What effect does Georgia's SCSR have on students' reading and math CRCT results? And (b) What effect do Title I or non-Title I status, the SCSR, and the interaction between the two have on reading and math scores? The authors found reading and math

achievement significantly impacted by school climate, with 82% of reading and 26% of math variance attributed to SCSR.

Similarly, O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, and Eklund (2015) sought to understand the moderating effects of school climate against home experiences, such as two-parent homes, single-parent homes, foster care, and homelessness. The researchers analyzed California Healthy Kids Survey data from 1.5 million students in 902 California public high schools. The findings showed that students with more positive school climate perceptions, regardless of family structure, reported higher GPAs. Homeless students indicating low and average perceptions of school climate had a difference of 0.98 reported in their GPA compared to students from a two-parent home (0.64), students from a single-parent home (0.71), and fostered students (0.49).

Maxwell et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study to examine the national standardized achievement scores of 2,257 students from 17 public schools. Maxwell et al. collected student and staff survey data using the School Climate and School Impact Model survey. Responses from 760 staff members of 17 public schools, in addition to the students' responses, underwent analysis through descriptive statistics. Maxwell et al. found a significant relationship between staff perceptions of school climate and student achievement. School climate and job satisfaction improve when administrators and district leaders support teachers in an open school climate that encourages establishing authentic relationships among all stakeholders, providing the trust necessary for teachers to take risks to improve instruction and contribute to professional decisions (Hoy & Hannum, 1997; McCarley et al., 2016).

Queer Theory and LGBTQ Identity

Queer theory, which emerged in the 1990s, promotes the concept that sexual orientation and biological gender are separate entities, and gender expression is a fluid concept that may

change over one's lifetime (Butler, 1990). The concepts of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation are interrelated but have distinct characteristics. Butler (1990) provided a poststructural framework for understanding the operation of social categories of gender. According to Meyer (2003), "Butler's concepts of gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix are of significant interest in understanding how homophobia and sexism work in schools" (p. 18). Furthermore, LGBTQ individuals outside the heterosexual norm suffer together from oppressive heteronormative institutions (Browne, 2019). Queer theorists urge not just tolerance of LGBTQ individuals but the complete inclusion within political and career institutions. The theory provides a forum for researchers to approach questioning differently than dominant approaches to feminism and intersectionality, thus examining normativity within organizational life (McDonald, 2015).

To better understand the concerns of LGBTQ educators, an appropriate discussion of LGBTQ identification is necessary. LGBTQ individuals' sexual orientation departed from the traditional heteronormative institution and established an alternate line of sexual orientation (Ahmed, 2006b). According to Blount (2000), gender is an individual's biological sex and attached meaning of maleness or femininity. Therefore, varied individual and cultural meanings associated with sexual anatomy and gender make for a complex concept. Jagose (1996) reflected on the evolution of homosexuality through the work of Foucault (1981). Homosexuality emerged in the literature in an 1870 article by Westphal. Once perceived as a temptation anyone could experience, same-sex relationships were now the milieu of individuals with distinct characteristics, according to Jagose (1996). However, research of the time focused on male subjects, thus associating homosexuality historically with men (Foucault, 1981; Jagose, 1996). Foucault adopted a binary concept of sexuality restricted to heterosexual and homosexual.

According to Butler (2004), the stereotypically effeminate homosexual man and butch lesbian are factors in the binary model proposed by Foucault. The lesbian emotionally and physically attracted to other women may present a gender that ranges from feminine to masculine. Likewise, the gay man emotionally and physically attracted to the same sex may show a gender ranging from masculine to feminine (Butler, 2004). These images depict the difference between sex versus gender.

Transsexual individuals internally identify with the gender of the other sex and cross traditional categories of sex and gender, including changing their bodies and clothing (McCarthy, 2003). Unlike lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, transgender educators may display visual markers of their status (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006). The use of hormone therapy and change in dress can differentiate transgender individuals from their previous genders. Transgender educators often change their locations, with those unable to relocate showing a visible and abrupt change recognizable to all (Biegel, 2010). Teachers, like students, are subject to heteronormative dress codes applied to individuals' presumed genders (Kahn & Gorski, 2016). According to Shelton and Lester (2018), transsexual students feel comfortable and confident in their "real clothes" (p. 398).

Bisexuals are emotionally and physically attracted to both men and women (Human Rights Campaign, 2019). The ability to move between heterosexual and homosexual relationships provides the bisexual individual with experiences of inequality and harassment suffered by lesbians and gays, in addition to benefits and affirmation afforded heterosexuals (Stewart, 2010). The categories of nonbinary and intersexual individuals who do not identify with either traditional gender type are especially confusing for some people. The intersexual may be born with the anatomy representative of both sexes (Stewart, 2010). There is an additional

group of individuals recognized as asexual who have no interest in physical sex and span gender identities (GLSEN, 2019). According to Butler (2004), everyone identifies with their most comfortable selves through sexual orientation, inward or outward gender expression, and conformance or nonconformance to gender socialization.

LGBTQ Educators

History

U.S. public education institutions have a long history of homophobia, which has oppressed LGBTQ individuals through public institutions and LEAs in addition to local and state government agencies (Blount, 2000; Graves, 2009; Harbeck, 1997). Walton (2005) equated the struggle against social and institutional homophobia to the fight against racism and sexism experienced by minorities. Walton observed, "Homophobia, like racism and sexism, manifests as violence perpetrated by an individual group but links to larger social realms of politics, public policy, legal structures, and institutional processes" (p. 96). Until 1973, the perception of homosexuality was a mental illness, a designation removed by the American Psychiatric Association in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Stewart, 2010). Nonheteronormative sexual orientation and gender identity are as old as humanity and, according to Stewart (2010), "There have been and will always be homosexual students and teachers in schools" (p. 265).

Blount's (2000) research into the history of gender and sexuality in education showed that polarization of gender roles in education emerged not from sexism alone but also fear of homosexuality and transgender identification. During the 1800s, single women entered the teaching profession in large numbers in response to teacher shortages from an expanded public school system (Blount, 2000). Single female teachers were a cost-effective solution to wartime

teacher shortages (Harbeck, 1997). Many states instituted marriage bans that required teachers to remain single, ensuring that husbands and children did not infringe upon students' needs. This shift to female teachers introduced the concept of the spinster teacher into the lexicon of U.S. public education (Blount, 2000). According to Blount, model schoolteachers were single women regarded as "high-minded, upstanding pillars of the community who selflessly devoted themselves to their students" (p. 87).

Women dominated the teaching profession during the early part of the 20th century, with men teaching young children increasingly seen as effeminate or unmanly (Graves, 2009). Phi Delta Kappa, a male education society, called for young students to enter the teaching profession and serve as masculine role models (Blount, 2000). The perception was that exposure to homosexual role models would instill homosexual tendencies and desires within children (Harbeck, 1997). To make education appealing to men, districts emphasized vocational training, math, science, coaching, and administration.

The expectation was that female teacher would work for a few years and move on to marriage and family, a transition for which teaching would prepare them (Blount, 2000). However, perceptions shifted in the mid-20th century, with America's single teachers seen as a threat to the traditional role of serving men. According to Blount (1996), 1920s sexology introduced questions regarding the sexual attraction of career-minded women, especially single female teachers living together as roommates or in teacher housing. Educators identified as spinster teachers found themselves targets of government organizations and politicians tasked with ridding the system of homosexuality. Consequently, many school systems lifted marriage bans after World War I, with female teachers encouraged to marry and produce children (Blount, 1996, 2000; Cavanagh, 2006). From the 1920s until World War II, the public educational system

began to take on the patriarchal family structure, with masculine males serving as superintendents and administrators and motherly females working as teachers (Blount, 2000). Society perceived especially effeminate men in education as sexual deviants, with subsequent stigmatization (Blount, 1996). Assumptions of sexually deviant educators developed from perceived threats to established gender order, as was the case for many effeminate men following World War II (Blount, 2000).

The Cold War and McCarthyism placed the homosexual threat at the forefront of education. This fear trickled down to local levels with President Eisenhower's signing of Executive Order 10450, which banned homosexuals from federal employment (Graves, 2009). Congressional inquiries into government employment of Communists and homosexuals encouraged school administrators to examine gender behaviors of school employees; often, only the rumor of homosexuality was grounds for dismissal (Blount, 1996; 2000; Graves, 2009). Schools across the United States terminated female teachers for living with members of the same sex in single-bedroom dwellings or for wearing clothes that appeared too masculine (Blount, 2000). Florida established the Legislative Investigation Committee in 1956, charged in 1959 with finding evidence of homosexuals working in state-sponsored agencies and suspending without prejudice any permit, certificate, or license possessed by homosexuals (Graves, 2009). According to Graves (2009), between 1958 and 1964, the Florida Department of Education revoked 98 certificates for moral turpitude, the code for homosexuality.

Legal

School administrators have functioned as enforcers of sexuality and gender norms since the 1920s, routinely making daily decisions addressing LGBTQ educators and students (Blount, 2003; Lugg, 2006). Hence, there was a need to educate school administrations on laws governing

the treatment of LGBTQ educators and students (Kosciw et al., 2016; Reynolds & Koski, 1993; Rottmann, 2006). In 2016, only 14 states had antidiscrimination laws regarding LGBTQ individuals (Kahn & Gorski, 2016). The termination of LGBTQ educators has often occurred under the auspice of moral turpitude clauses (Kahn & Gorski, 2016). Furthermore, school boards commonly entrusted district and school administrations to hire, fire, reprimand, and suspend individuals within the school system in accordance with local norms and standards of behavior, as well as to abide by and enforce commonly held notions of sexuality and gender (Blount, 2003; Lugg, 2006).

The issue of LGBTQ educators arose in the Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas*, as Chief Justice Rehnquist questioned the constitutionality of denying homosexuals the right to teach kindergarten. Associate Justice Scalia supported keeping homosexuals out of the classroom because "children might be induced to follow the path to homosexuality." Bishop, Caraway, and Stader (2010) stressed the need for legal protections for LGBTQ educators. The 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) decision reversed 1986's *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision upholding Georgia's antisodomy legislation, thus invalidating laws throughout the United States criminalizing sodomy between consenting adults. However, many state legislatures failed to repeal laws barring sodomy (Bishop et al., 2010).

In 1971, Peggy Burton was the first LGBTQ teacher to file a federal civil rights suit for unwarranted dismissal for admitting to being a lesbian (Graves, 2018). An Oregon District Court struck down the immorality statute cited by school officials. However, Burton was an untenured teacher and without recourse, given the absence of equal protection. More than a decade later, the decision in *National Gay Task Force v. Board of Education, Oklahoma City* in 1984 was that the termination of teachers advocating homosexuality was unconstitutional. Still, LGBTQ

teachers were not a protected class, such as racial minority-afforded protection from discrimination (Bishop et al., 2010).

According to Eckes (2017), "Law continues to influence matters related to education policy; this is especially true in the context of employment of LGBT teachers" (p. 53). As set forth in the case of *Bailey v. Mansfield Independent School District*, Stacey Bailey received a suspension from her job as an elementary school art teacher with reassignment to a secondary school after parent complaints about including a picture of herself and her now-wife in a first-day-of-school PowerPoint presentation (Platoff, 2018). The federal judge deciding the case cited the lack of protections for LGBTQ individuals as one of the reasons for dismissal.

In 1987, *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education* established a precedent in the subject of sexual orientation in school curriculum. The Sixth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that challenging homosexuality in sex education curriculum and exposure to language and ideas contrary to one's religious sensibilities via textbooks did not receive the same consideration as promoting values (Biegel, 2010). Alabama and Texas adopted laws in response to the ruling that presented homosexuality in divisive and negative terms, instructing textbook manufacturers to note that homosexuality was not a lifestyle accepted by the public at large (Biegel, 2010).

Under the Trump administration, the U.S. Department of Justice reversed a previous assertion by the Obama administration, suggesting there was no protection for LGBTQ employees on the basis of sexual orientation under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Riotta, 2017). According to Eckes (2017), LBGTQ educators may still have recourse under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protects citizens from discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, and religion. However, there is no federal law specifically prohibiting workplace discrimination concerning sexual orientation.

Ensuring the equal treatment of LGBTQ individuals in the workplace has been successful with Title VII under three criteria. The first criterion was determining whether the harassment would have occurred if the victim's gender were different. Second, it was necessary to base sexual orientation discrimination and gender discrimination on a common definition of sex. Third, courts needed to determine whether discrimination against the person identifying as LGBTQ was due to a lack of sufficient masculinity or femininity (Chavan, 2015). According to McSpedon (2014), the Title VII test used in *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins,* sex stereotyping, should be what employers use to create a policy for the equal treatment of employees.

Experiences

According to Hernandez and Fraynd (2014), leaders within the educational system tasked diversity committees, volunteers, or student organizations with creating a positive school culture inclusive of LGBTQ individuals rather than approaching the issues personally. However, cultural change starts at the grassroots level; leadership must be willing to take a stand regarding controversial topics, such as LGBTQ equality (Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Wright, 2009). The positive relationship between faculty and administration provides a clear expectation of student behavior. Therefore, administrators who appear tolerant of homophobic or discriminatory actions through absent or ineffectual responses or consequences will continue to struggle in creating positive school climates and work environments for all LGBTQ educators (Walton, 2005; Wright & Smith, 2015).

Lineback, Allender, Gaines, McCarthy, and Butler (2016) conducted a qualitative study of 11 lesbian or gay educators to answer three questions: First, what demands do lesbian and gay teachers face concerning their sexual orientation at school? Second, what coping strategies do lesbian and gay teachers use? Lastly, how do school context and teachers' levels of openness

impact demands and resources? Through the analysis of semi-structured interview data, Lineback et al. found several common themes. Lesbian and gay teachers reported derogatory comments, negative interactions with parents, and overt discrimination. Participants experienced a fear of discrimination, guilt over being closeted, and internalized homophobia.

In 2007 and 2011, Wright and Smith conducted surveys of LGBTQ educators, including paraprofessionals, teachers, counselors, and principals from all grade levels. The researchers surveyed more than 500 participants in the two studies. Wright (2009) used a quantitative approach, whereas Wright and Smith (2015) used mixed methods by adding open-ended questions to the survey. The purpose of Wright and Smith's 2007 and 2011 studies was to examine LGBTQ educators' perceptions of school climate via the perception of safety, policy support, and school homophobia regarding outness. According to the findings, one-third of participants felt their jobs would be at risk if they were out, and 75% had experienced homophobia. Of the one quarter who reported experiencing harassment, three-fifths did not make a report (Wright & Smith, 2015). Most participants reported more negative feelings than positive consequences of being out at school. According to the researchers, feelings of discomfort and harassment, and worries about job security were prevalent. Age played an essential role, as younger education professionals ages 18 to 42 years felt more support from principals than those 43 to 50 years of age: job safety, a vital indicator of outness, varied by location. Educators in the South felt less secure than those in the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions. Conversely, participants working in environments with bullying policies, which included language regarding homophobia and principal support, felt increased job safety (Wright, 2009; Wright & Smith, 2015).

Perceived support from state law, union contracts, and local ordinances decreased from the 2007 data to the 2011 results (Wright & Smith, 2015). In 2016, only 14 states had anti-discrimination laws, and just 19 states had antibullying laws (Kahn & Gorski, 2016). Thirty-six states allow districts to terminate teachers for giving the impression of being LGBTQ, with termination generally permitted by moral turpitude clauses. The combination of conservative culture and unequal protection created a problematic environment for LGBTQ educators (Fetner et al., 2012; Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015). However, the LGBTQ educators who reported feeling supported were also those identifying as more out. Currently, in Georgia, only Fulton and DeKalb counties offer protections for sexual orientation (Movement Advancement Project, 2020). Without specific protections, LGBTQ individuals remain subjected to informal policies, such as the obsolete "don't ask, don't tell" military policy (Cech & Rothwell, 2020).

On the other hand, Wright and Smith (2015) found that in 2011, fewer colleagues were using homophobic language than reported in 2007. The reduced offensive language aligned with an increased number of schools creating policies against homophobic language. However, there was little impact on student behavior, indicating strength in policymaking and weakness in enforcement. Furthermore, two-thirds of LGBTQ educators surveyed reported never receiving professional development regarding LGBTQ students, and even fewer had received LGBTQ training in a professional or curricular manner. The most positive consequence reported of being out was that it enabled teachers to be supportive of LGBTQ students.

Butler (2004) and Ahmed (2006a) noted that discrimination of LGBTQ individuals resulted from heteronormative majorities within institutions. According to Wright and Smith (2015), participants endured antigay comments, antigay literature, and isolation. As one

participant noted, “Usually, students, parents, and teachers of the right-wing Christian faith are at the root of the harassment” (Wright & Smith, 2015, p. 400).

Wright (2009) and Wright and Smith (2015) identified three implications for their research findings. First, administrative practices and policies must be in place for LGBTQ employees to increase the level of outness. Second, professional development and community education regarding the differences between pedophilia and homosexuality are needed. Last, providing legal protections for LGBTQ educators will increase levels of outness.

According to a study conducted by the National Center for Civil and Human Rights LBGTQ Institute at Georgia State University, LGBTQ individuals in the Southern United States continue to experience discrimination (Wright et al., 2018). The organization collected responses from over 6,500 LGBTQ adults from 14 Southern states. Through descriptive statistics, researchers found that LGBTQ individuals in these regions continued to endure homophobic slurs, rejection by family members, unwelcome at places of worship, and substandard service within the community. Participants who identified as gay reported more instances of threats or physical attacks (53.9%), slurs or jokes (86.5%), and rejection in places of worship (58.3%). Bisexual participants discussed lower rates of discrimination except for rejection by religious institutions. In combination with Wright and Smith (2015), Wright et al. (2018) showed that despite advances in equal treatment, LGBTQ individuals in the Southern United States, including educators, continue to face discrimination at higher rates than their Northern and Western counterparts.

Rural Areas

Much of the research findings on LGBTQ issues suggests that conservative, rural areas are especially unwelcoming and hostile toward LGBTQ teachers and students (Fetner et al.,

2012; Kosciw et al., 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015). According to Kosciw et al. (2016), homophobic remarks by school faculty and staff increased in 2015. The scholars suggested that "further research should explore potential explanations be it changes in the teacher workforce, potential backlash to the recent gains of LGBTQ rights from resistant educators, or other various other factors" (p. 127). Given the consistency and continued overrepresentation of Southern locations reporting homophobic verbal and physical harassment, researchers indicated the need for more focused research to address rural Southern schools (Kosciw et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2012).

Swank et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative study to determine exposure to stress among rural sexual minorities. The researchers hypothesized that residing in rural or Southern areas would result in excessive exposure to stress. Participant recruitment was via online listservs with selection based on geographic locations and sexual orientation, with a final sample of 285 lesbian, gay, and bisexual men and women. Through quantitative analysis and descriptive statistics, Swank et al. established that LGBTQ individuals living in rural areas of the Southern United States faced more discrimination. Furthermore, verbal threats and threats of violence were the most common sources of harassment. The findings also showed rural LGBTQ individuals subjected to greater stigma and harassment while being disconnected from larger LGBTQ communities and resources. Swank et al.'s findings were consistent with GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2016), suggesting the need for connection and resources for rural South Georgia LGBTQ educators and students.

Kazyak (2012) interviewed more than 60 rural lesbian and gay individuals, analyzing the inherent relationships among place, gender, and sexuality to understand the gendering of acceptance of lesbians and gays in small towns. The researcher found the construct of male

femininity aligned with gay sexuality but not with a rural identity, constraining gay men living and working in those areas. Conversely, the construct of feminine masculinity aligned with rural identity and allowed rural lesbians to engage as masculine, therefore reproducing small-town rural gender order.

A rural, conservative, antihomosexual culture can create what Barton (2012) has called "a toxic closet" (p. 91). In these situations, the inability to acknowledge one's sexual orientation in a positive light can impede the expression of feelings necessary for self-reflection, creativity, and academic growth. Jennings (2015) collected essays addressing the experiences of LGBTQ educators from around the world. Waters and Waters (2015) were enthusiastic about sharing stories of coming out, stating, "What we didn't know when we came out at our respective schools is that we would open the floodgates to our peers sharing their own coming-out stories" (p. 56). Jennings's (2015) study included one educator, Esih Efuru, from Charleston, South Carolina. Jennings exposed the perception of some heterosexual educators that homosexuality is the result of hypersensitivity or female domination. Efuru chronicled a conversation involving his fellow teachers regarding students' sexual orientations carried out in his presence, documenting views that individuals are not born homosexual but rather biblically in a state of "spiritual confusion" (Jennings, 2015, p. 141).

Openness

Heteronormative institutions such as K-12 schools place the burden on LGBTQ individuals to "come out." If no LGBTQ students or faculty do, then the institution functions as if all members are heterosexual, with no conflict acknowledged (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014). Rottmann (2006) described a disconnect between heteronormative symbols and acceptable conversation and the pressure to hide LGBTQ conversations and symbolism:

> Sexually-minoritized individuals who would like to maintain job security, safety, and comfort in the school system are pressured to keep their sexual identity private, while those whose sexual identity coincides with societal norms are encouraged to flaunt their sexuality publicly through wedding rings and discussions in the staff room about family-related issues provides evidence that we still have something to debate or discuss. (p. 15)

Despite advances in the equal treatment of the LGBTQ community, LGBTQ teachers, whether in or out of the closet, report that school climate is a source of stress; this is the case especially in the Southern United States where high levels of homophobic language and harassment are experienced (Wright & Smith, 2015). Although LGBTQ educators could serve as positive role models and mentors for LGBTQ students, they faced homophobic harassment and may not always be out and available (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). Additionally, Wright and Smith (2015) acknowledged that educators need a safe environment to be productive, stating, "Educators need to feel safe and accepted to provide the best education for their students" (p. 395).

McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, and Rudnick (2015) completed a comparative qualitative analysis of 29 individuals, four of whom identified as lesbians, 20 as gay or queer men, and nine as lesbian or queer women. Ten resided on the East Coast, eight on the West Coast and Central United States region, and three in the South. McKenna-Buchanan et al. sought to examine the criteria LGBTQ college educators used to disclose or conceal sexual orientation in the classroom and how they maintain control of disclosure and conceal information. The researchers identified cultural criteria used in the decision-making process to come out, encompassing geographic location, and sociopolitical environment. A lesbian participant from the Southern United States was especially hesitant to disclose her sexual orientation to students, citing a small, rural area

and conservative cultural climate. Gender criteria, specifically the individuals' gender performance, were considerations in the process of coming out. This was evident in the participant's acknowledgment of her androgynous, heteronormative, or queer appearance. Participants used risk-benefit criteria to calculate the positive and negative consequences of disclosing their sexual orientation. According to the authors, participants' internal motivation to disclose or reveal sexual orientation manifested as a desire to share private information to encourage students to think critically regarding different sexual and gender orientations.

McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2015) noted that LGBTQ educators used four strategies when disclosing or concealing their sexual orientation to students. First, reciprocity is a means to evaluate and disclose sexual orientation or to come out. Students or coworkers reveal their sexual orientation reciprocally when they feel a modicum of safety. Second, LGBTQ teachers may use ambiguity to allow multiple interpretations of sexual orientation. This ambiguity is a chance for teachers to test the situation and retain the true nature of their sexual orientation. Third, deflection may be a way to ignore inquiry into sexual orientation. Finally, avoidance is a means to divert conversations of sexual orientation altogether. However, exhaustive, ambitious, or reluctant, all LGBTQ educators within the study performed a cost-benefit analysis when considering coming out to their fellow educators and students.

When teachers have felt empowered to come out and acknowledge their sexual orientation, reciprocity can be a powerful force (Jennings, 2015). The combination of conservative culture and unequal protection creates a problematic environment for LGBTQ educators (Fetner et al., 2012; Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Wright & Smith, 2015). Coulter et al. (2017) asserted that LGBTQ students need positive role models and mentors, as shown by examining the differences between in-school and

out-of-school mentorship and the suicidal proclivity of LGBTQ students compared to heterosexual students. In a survey of more than 20,000 individuals, over 90% of heterosexual students reported having adult support outside of school, and 70% reported in-school support from at least one adult. In comparison, LGBTQ students were significantly less likely to have support, as only 78% reported having a supportive family member. Furthermore, the researchers found that 8% of heterosexual students have suicidal plans, and 3.4% attempt suicide, as opposed to 37% of LGBTQ students having a plan and 24% attempting suicide.

Most researchers of LGBTQ issues in education have examined the unequal treatment or perceptions of harassment and abuse suffered by LGBTQ students. In studies regarding the need for mentors and adult relationships, many school counselors and educators or family members failed to connect LGBTQ educators and students (Drevon, Almazan, Jacob, & Rhymer, 2016; Johns, Poteat, Horn, & Kosciw, 2019; Reynolds & Koski, 1993; Wright & Smith, 2015).

LGBTQ Inclusion

According to the GaDOE, in accordance with the public education community, educators need to feel supported by their administrators in an open school climate. Administrators should encourage sincere relationships among all stakeholders and provide the trust necessary for teachers to take risks. Involving teachers would boost instruction by their contributions to professional decisions to improve school climate and increase job satisfaction (GaDOE, 2020; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; McCarley et al., 2016). Likewise, Wright and Smith (2015) said LGBTQ educators also need to feel included and supported by school and district leadership through actions and policies expressing acceptance of their LGBTQ status.

Gay-Straight Alliances

GLSEN researchers found that schools with operational GSA clubs reported fewer instances of the word "gay" used with a negative connotation, at a rate of 59% compared to 77% in schools without a GSA club. Additionally, schools with supportive GSAs reported fewer instances (51% opposed to 68%) of hearing homophobic language, such as "fag" or "dyke" (Kosciw et al., 2016). However, there were few GSAs in South Georgia (Fetner et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2016).

Fetner et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study of GSA Safe Spaces to clarify the discourse regarding safe spaces without imposing limits on what may represent a safe space. The research study included more than 50 participants in the United States and Canada involved in GSAs or similar LGBTQ organizations, with 38 participants having a direct GSA relationship. Researchers examined participants' experiences of a hostile school climate, GSA membership, and opportunities for activism. The findings were consistent with Kosciw et al.'s (2016) GLSEN study. Barriers to GSA implementation were both internal—from school administration, faculty, and students—and external, through community and conservative organizations (Fetner et al., 2012).

GSA Safe Space clubs must adhere to school regulations and policies. Reactions to the clubs' formation have been quite hostile to include homophobic harassment or student assault (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Fetner et al., 2012). Participants in Fetner et al.'s (2012) study reported harassment by teachers, administrators, and students that encompassed derogatory language, separation from peers, and destruction of GSA property. There was more significant harassment from administrators, teachers, and peers and greater hostility in conservative towns. An important implication of the research by Fetner et al. (2012) and Kosciw et al. (2016) pertinent to

LGBTQ educators was that resistance to GSAs could indicate a lack of support by school and district leadership of LGBTQ issues.

LGBTQ Curriculum

According to Compton (2016), communication is the primary management tool for relaying the perception of sexual identity. Therefore, any solution to produce a positive school climate for LGBTQ educators and students should include communications within the organization's LGBTQ community, extending outward while focusing on building knowledge of self and others (Compton, 2016; McCready et al., 2013). Including LGBTQ issues and related content in schools has been legal in almost all states since 2010. However, some Southern states have laws limiting LGBTQ content within the curriculum of sex education classes, other states have included anti-discrimination provisions, and 40 states were without any statutory restrictions on curricular decisions ((Biegel, 2010). Students have the right to information and ideas under the First Amendment, as determined by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Board of Education v. Pico* (Biegel, 2010).

Ladson-Billings (1995) reflected on the goals and aspirations of many educators to foster within their students the desire and ability to think critically and address injustice. The author asserted, "Students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (p. 160). Rosiek, Schmitke, and Heffernan (2017) examined an effort to reform the curriculum of a Master's teacher certification program at the University of Oregon. The case study focused on the experiences of the authors, who were the Department Head, Department Director of Undergraduate Programs, and Professor, respectively, during the change process. The

case study data consisted of the authors' recollections and 40 interviews with faculty, students, and local activists.

The University of Oregon addressed the Education Department's lack of focus on issues of culture and difference (Rosiek et al., 2017). The concern voiced by Native American students, immigrants' rights activists from local school districts, and ethnic studies programs was that the teacher education program produced "culturally incompetent" teachers. The university embraced a cross-curricular approach to cultural, racial, and language differences after the protests, opting to incorporate culture, race, and language into classes throughout the program and abandon single, multicultural classes. A perplexing finding of the study was that, regardless of the large number of LGBTQ students represented in the many factions of protest, the concept of gender pluralism disappeared in the aftermath.

Rosiek et al. (2017) stated that the study's significance lay in the lessons learned to gain institutional change in an area such as LGBTQ curriculum. First, pressure from a grassroots movement is invaluable. Second, the pressure exerted for change is dependent on individuals willing to expend political capital for long-term solutions. Third, a combination of multiple issues increases the ability to change the curriculum. Finally, the struggle to continue discourse and keep matters of gender bias and LGBTQ students' needs at the forefront can disappear in a call for greater diversity. According to Rosiek et al., future actions require advocacy for LGBTQ content in teacher education programs and increased awareness of patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies to minimize LGBTQ issues.

Rhodes and Coda (2017) conducted a phenomenological study exploring the perceptions of English language teachers regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ issues within the curriculum. The 26 participants were teachers employed in adult English language classrooms. Data analyses

indicated support for the inclusion of LGBTQ material. However, the authors suggested that incorporating such issues in the curriculum could be challenging. For example, many participants noted the lack of materials, including the omission of LGBTQ issues or topics for textbooks. The majority of respondents mentioned a willingness to address LGBTQ issues in classroom discussions when faced with the "teachable moment." However, they often voiced a lack of training and confidence to handle such unplanned situations. Rhodes and Coda recommended professional development to craft lessons that explore perceptions regarding normative gender roles.

Educators willing to incorporate LGBTQ-inclusive material often face a shortage of appropriate resources and texts (Rhodes & Coda, 2017). Many teachers have insufficient knowledge of LGBTQ issues and could be hesitant and culturally incompetent to address the subjects. Therefore, the manufacture and distribution of LGBTQ-friendly material and the establishment of professional learning programs have been essential to creating an effective and encompassing LGBTQ curriculum. Shelton and Lester (2018) acknowledged the need for affirmation of LGBTQ issues within the educational curriculum:

> What is perhaps most remarkable is that the referenced curriculum was both outdated and unremarkable; instead, it was the teacher's efforts to accentuate the ways that real-life deviated from the textbook, and the lesson plans inclusion of a range of different ways of seeing and living life, that validated our and possibly peers' own experiences and formative notions of self. (p. 11)

Presenting school curriculum in a heteronormative context that addresses sex, sexuality, and gender in the classroom can be ineffectual for LGBTQ students (Preston, 2016). Preston (2016) conducted a grounded theory study to explore how sex education teachers respond to

LGBTQ students and homophobic bullying and thus regulate sexuality and gender. Preston interviewed 15 current or former sex education teachers regarding their perceptions of LGBTQ students. There were 11 teachers from public schools, one teacher from a private school, one public school high school health educator, one state health education trainer, and one county health educator.

Although the 15 participants viewed the sex education classroom as a safe place for forthright and honest discussions, most held an essentialist view of sex and gender as one concept and therefore embraced a binary idea of gender identity (Preston, 2016). Furthermore, the teachers did not recognize any LGBTQ students and dismissed bullying and harassment they had witnessed as immature behavior. Consequently, many of the sex education teachers communicated a need for professional development for teaching sexuality. Preston (2016) noted a disparity between sexuality education and sex education. Additionally, when teachers do not have the tools to work against the hegemony of gender and sexuality or fail to recognize LGBTQ students and take bullying seriously, students' options are limited.

Biegel (2010) advocated for the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the K-12 curriculum in *The Right to Be Out: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in America's Public Schools*. Focusing on the histories of LGBTQ individuals and telling their stories in the context of state standards of excellence in education can be a trying but necessary first step in introducing an LGBTQ curriculum. Incorporating LGBTQ issues in communities reluctant to face controversy should occur incrementally. K-12 schools can benefit from higher education models, as college classes on civil rights, law, and LGBTQ issues could provide information on the age-appropriateness of materials and lessons for the K-12 environment.

According to Biegel (2010), one of the most promising avenues for including LGBTQ issues in the K-12 curriculum is the use of current events. America's K-12 educators commonly introduce current events to provide context for social studies lessons. For example, students could report on and discuss student activism, freedom of speech, school safety, school sports, and the military, all of which might include the right to be out. McCready et al. (2013) also advocated for the inclusion of sexual orientation within the social studies and science classrooms via the discussion of such revered individuals as Sir Francis Bacon, Leonardo da Vinci, and Florence Nightingale. Incorporating the accomplishments of LGBTQ individuals within the curriculum provides examples for LGBTQ students and, especially in conservative rural areas, combats the perception of isolation and establishes a link with the broader LGBTQ community (Shelton & Lester, 2018).

Diversity

Coleman, Negrón, and Lipper (2011) asserted that diversity embraces human differences in a multidimensional and inclusive manner. The authors suggested school administrators promote diversity by acknowledging differences in race, ethnicity, or gender's impact on learning. To improve school climate, GaDOE has embraced LKES, a significant component of which involves promoting a positive school climate under an administrator who "consistently models and collaboratively promotes high expectations, mutual respect, concern, and empathy for students, staff, parents, and community" (GaDOE, 2020, p. 22). Creating a positive school climate for all students is achievable by increasing the diversity of faculty and staff to include more LGBTQ individuals, thus enhancing the organization's performance (Fitterling, 2016; Githens, 2012; Thomas, 2006). According to Thomas (2006), effective leaders understand that individuals may find it challenging to make worthwhile decisions when struggling with

differences, similarities, and tensions. The effective leader will recognize that managing and cultivating diversity can tap the full potential of coworkers. Employees who do not have to expend energy on self-protection strategies because of working in a heterosexist environment may feel a stronger connection with the institution, evidencing more outness about LGBTQ status and increased job performance (Brenner, Lyons, & Fassinger, 2010).

Diversity management used by leaders will not eliminate issues or differences but can provide the leader with tools to address divisions affecting the organization's ability to achieve set goals (Thomas, 2006). Githens (2012) conducted a qualitative case study to understand approaches to diversity education. The investigation centered around the strategies used by LGBTQ activists attempting to garner support for domestic partnership benefits at a major university and was part of a more extensive study to understand the process of implementing domestic partnerships in a state university system. Githens used purposeful sampling to identify and interview 21 individuals involved in advocating for domestic partnerships for over 20 years.

Githens (2012) wanted to identify the most effective approaches to including diversity to effect change within the organization. Among those studied were identity-awareness, identity-critique, and identity-influence. Findings of the longitudinal study showed that approaches to education regarding a contentious and high-profile issue resulted in activists censoring their approaches. The coalition of efforts became contradictory, and groups shifted to a mixture of the harmonious diversity and identity-aware approaches. According to Githens, the most successful approach to diversity to effect change within an organization was testimonials. School administrators can help their organizations positively impact their LGBTQ educators through adult education and testimonials from current LGBTQ educators.

The case for organizational diversity regarding sexual orientation and gender underwent a quantitative examination in a study by Cunningham (2011) of the Laboratory for Diversity in Sport within the Department of Health and Kinesiology at Texas A&M University. Cunningham investigated the case for organizational diversity regarding sexual orientation and gender. The purpose of the study was to establish an association between sexual orientation diversity and organizational performance. The sample consisted of 780 senior administrators from the National Collegiate Athletic Association: 302 women, 467 men, and 11 who did not list sex. Statistical data gathered via a questionnaire underwent analysis through descriptive statistics. Athletic departments representing a diverse sexual orientation of athletes and performance points awarded by the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletes showed a positive association. Organizations that undertook a proactive diversity strategy had a stronger positive relationship between sexual orientation diversity and increased performance. Cunningham added to the quantitative evidence that an organization's performance could benefit from having a diverse team inclusive of LGBTQ members.

Chapter Summary

During a 2014 Time to Thrive convocation, Chelsea Clinton referred to the quest for LGBTQ equality as "the unfinished work of the 21st century" (Abcarian, 2014). This call to action suggested that school administrators should be prepared to address school climate and ensure a positive, safe, and nurturing educational environment for all students, including the LGBTQ community, as noted by Standard 2 of the 2020 Georgia Department of Education's LKES framework. Cubberley's 1916 statement, "As is the principal, so is the school" (p. 190), is just as relevant today as it was over a century ago.

Traditional heteronormative concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity are interwoven into the fabric of the public school system and continue to be a source of conflict, despite advances in LGBTQ equality (Blount, 1996, 2000; Butler, 2004; Graves, 2009; Lugg, 2006). A climate of bullying, intimidation, and harassment faces both LGBTQ teachers and students, which creates a toxic environment in which to learn. Teachers and students experienced the harassment and homophobic attitudes to a greater extent in the rural areas of Southern U.S. states (Kosciw et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2008; Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). Principals in rural areas failed to recognize their own biases and the biases of others that allow for the perpetuation of homophobic attitudes (Albritton et al., 2017). This failure is especially concerning because LGBTQ students are at greater risk of dropping out of school, ending up homeless, or committing suicide (Johnson & Gastic, 2015; Mulcahy et al., 2016).

Until 2017, the vast majority of research into education and LGBTQ issues focused on the plight of LGBTQ students, with findings showing the presence of GSAs and Safe Spaces reduced homophobic harassment in the long term (Johnson & Gastic, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2016; Mulcahy et al., 2016). However, few schools in South Georgia offer GSAs, according to the GLSEN (2019) Georgia Snapshot. Furthermore, there remains within conservative, rural areas a reluctance to start the conversation regarding sexual orientation and the needs of LGBTQ faculty and students (Biegel, 2010; Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Shelton & Lester, 2018).

I identified a gap in LGBTQ literature regarding how public education addresses the experiences of LGBTQ educators living and working in rural areas. Except for Wright (2009) and Wright and Smith (2015), there has been little focus on LGBTQ educators' perceptions of school climate and the experiences of those in the rural South (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015;

Shelton & Lester, 2018; Wright & Smith, 2015). This study helped fill the void within the literature by investigating LBGTQ educators' experiences and perceptions of school climate and the mentorship of LGBTQ students at an identified rural South Georgia public school system.

Chapter III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate reported a negative school climate for LGBTQ educators, who feared harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known. I explored the lives and educational experiences of veteran LGBTQ faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district about their fear of harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known. I also wanted to know that if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. In this chapter, I focus on the methods and procedures used in a qualitative case study of veteran LGBTQ educators, exploring their lives and career experiences within their natural settings through interviews and observations. The objective of a case study is to establish an understanding of particular situations or issues through the investigation of one or more individuals' perspectives, behavior, and context (Merriam, 2002).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (p. 23). The use of qualitative methodology allowed for in-depth examinations of LGBTQ individuals' backgrounds, experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes than a quantitative study would have permitted. Qualitative analysis facilitates extensive inquiry from a limited number of participants, providing a pathway to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their worldviews, and assign meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Implemented in 2012, Standard 2 of the Georgia LKES was a means to improve school culture for all stakeholders. The most recent National School Climate Survey indicated a negative perception of school climate held by LGBTQ faculty and students (Kosciw et al., 2016; Wright, 2009; Wright & Smith, 2015). The goal of this study was to determine if veteran LGBTQ faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district feared harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. If a negative perception of school climate exists, it is necessary to determine what policies and practices to implement to improve the school environment for LGBTQ educators, as is possible through an exploration of LGBTQ educators' experiences. With the purpose and goal of the study in mind, the following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are the life and career experiences of identified LGBTQ veteran educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district?

RQ2: Do identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known?

RQ3: If identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination, what strategies have they used to manage their careers?

Research Design and Method

Given the sensitive nature of this topic, a case study was appropriate not only because it is a commonly used approach (e.g., Renn & Bilodeau, 2005), but it is a way to understand how individuals interpret their experiences in varied contexts, providing researchers with a clear but flexible process for gathering data. Merriam (1998) defined a case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a

process, or a social unit" (p. xiii). For the purpose of this study, the case was school climate for LGBTQ educators, and the units of analysis were the rural veteran LGBTQ educators. Although there are many designs and versions of case studies (Yazan, 2015), a single-case embedded design was appropriate due to the multiple units of analysis within a shared context (Yin, 2017). In other words, because the educators came from one school/school system, they shared a context. A case study was the most consistent with the goals and subject of this study: to determine if identified LGBTQ veteran faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. To determine if a negative perception of school climate existed, it was necessary to identify available policies and practices to improve the school environment for rural LGBTQ educators.

Context

The context of this study was an identified school system within the Southeast region of Georgia. A rural South Georgia location provided a snapshot of LGBTQ educators' experiences of school climate, with the study providing information absent in the research regarding LGBTQ students and faculty. This Southeast Georgia county has one school district serving PK-12 in which 100% of students obtain free/reduced lunch. All schools within the district participate in the Title I program that provides financial assistance to local educational agencies in low-income areas to help student performance meet rigorous state standards through proven programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The county is a rural area economically dependent on agriculture and manufacturing to support its 42,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The largest employer in the county is the school system, with more than 1,400 employees.

Concentrating on a single district or school allowed the assessment of LGBTQ educators' perceptions of a single rural Southern climate, eliminating the influence of multiple administrations or district approaches to school climate. The identified school system had a student population of more than 3,900, with 262 certified teaching staff and administrators in Grades 6 through 12. Individuals in conservative, rural areas are generally reluctant to start the conversation regarding sexual orientation and the needs of LGBTQ students and faculty (Biegel, 2010; Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Shelton & Lester, 2018). There are more than 30 churches located in the county seat, and over 100 of them within the county.

Participant Selection/Sampling

According to Maxwell (2013), purposeful selection entails choosing individuals for characteristics critical to testing and exploring theories and subsequent developments. Researchers can choose between the broader data fields of heterogeneous sampling and the concentrated data field of homogenous sampling. Homogenous sampling was appropriate to select participants from one school. This method allowed me to obtain their life and career experiences as LGBTQ educators who work or have worked at an identified rural Southeast Georgia public school district.

I used purposeful sampling to identify five participants from a population of 120 practicing educators and others previously employed at the identified school system within the last five years. Selection criteria included veteran LGBTQ educators with longevity (over five years), self-reported positive relationships and summative TKES evaluations of Level III or above, and affiliation with the school system. According to Atran, Medin, and Ross (2005), it is possible to obtain a cultural consensus despite a relatively small sample size. The recruitment of individuals with experience with the same phenomena and culture allowed for fewer participants.

I obtained informed consent before interviewing any participant. To address the potential risk to participants and reflect the effort to reduce potential harm, I provided all participants with an informed consent form (see Appendix A).

The number of participants chosen was to mirror the percentage of LGBTQ individuals in Georgia's population, which is approximately 2.5% (Williams Institute, n.d.). Because the study focused on a rural perception of school climate among LGBTQ educators, having a sample size representative of the larger population was appropriate to provide a realistic and obtainable number. I had personal awareness of three potential participants from the identified high school. To ensure a sufficient sample size in the event of attrition, I used snowball sampling, asking established participants to recommend qualified others (Patton, 2002).

Researcher's Role

A qualitative approach places the researcher within the study to negotiate with individuals, referred to as gatekeepers, which provide entry into the culture and access to participants (Patton, 2002). For this study, the gatekeepers were the principals within each school. The role of the researcher in a qualitative study is to be a "human instrument of data collection" (Patton, 2002, p. 51). The primary tool for collecting and analyzing qualitative data is the researcher; given that the primary collection tool is a human being and thus both efficient and versatile, there remains the possibility of bias (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative methodology, and its use of the researcher as a "human instrument," is adaptable and allows the interpretation of nonverbal communication, the immediate processing of information, and the ability to check for clarity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Humans have shortcomings and biases, which a researcher must strive to make visible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher should be mindful of any subjectivity or bias that can

result in selective interpretation. Maxwell (2013) advised the qualitative researcher to reveal any connection or past experiences with the research problem, setting, and participants. Acknowledging possible biases allows a scholar to reflect on, address, and interpret data more consistent with the participant's intention (Patton, 2002). As an administrator, it is my goal to create an equitable and caring environment for all teachers and students. My experience as an educator in rural Southeast Georgia has aroused a great fear: to lose a student or faculty member to homophobic bullying or harassment via suicide or violence. Researchers must understand and use their bias appropriately, as they cannot eliminate it (Merriam, 2002). Patton (2002) suggested that researchers "not fail to challenge all the assumptions, especially [their] own, nor ever assume that [they] have all the questions, much less the answers, right" (p. 337). I understood researching LGBTQ educators' perceptions of school climate conveyed acceptance and concern for LGBTQ issues. Therefore, I took into account the participants' perceptions of their part in the study.

As an educator with more than 12 years of experience, I have worked at the middle and high school levels within the district identified for the study. This is the same community where I grew up. Although I am a heterosexual, cisgender male, I have taught many LGBTQ students and been colleagues to LGBTQ educators. However, no direct power relationship or social relationship existed with any participant in the study. My statement acknowledging past experiences and possible biases is in the section on trustworthiness.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

To understand the experience of LGBTQ educators' perceptions of school climate, it is necessary to establish an open and in-depth verbal and written dialogue (Merriam, 2002). I used multiple data sources and a range of participants for data collection to triangulate the findings

and strengthen the study's reliability through several perspectives of the phenomena (Maxwell, 2013). I classified all data, organizing them into one secure database. Providing a chain of evidence and proper data classification helped ensure correct source citation and increased reliability. Collected data included researcher memos, digital interview recordings, interview transcripts, system 5-year plan, LKES, and participant interview reflections.

Interviews

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative data may consist of observation memos, interviews, and journals. Maxwell (2013) noted that researchers could collect qualitative data in the form of journals, formal and informal interviews, questionnaires, and observations. The main instrument used to collect data in this study was in-depth interviews containing open-ended questions, allowing for observations. Seidman (2013) said that an interview

> It is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understating the experience of the individual whose lives reflect those issues. As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. (p. 13)

I used the guided interview to ensure a basic structure of questioning to all participants while allowing the flexibility to explore particular topics that spontaneously arose (Patton, 2002). I created guided interview questions inspired by the literature and research questions are listed in appendix (B). The guided interview questions were a means to address the gap in LGBTQ literature regarding rural areas and the experiences of LGBTQ educators, producing a resource as mentors for LGBTQ students in the absence of GSAs (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Shelton & Lester, 2018; Wright & Smith, 2015). An LGBTQ college student reviewed the questions for face validity. The advantage of using a guided interview format is increased time management

and a structured approach to interviewing multiple participants (Patton, 2002). Interviews occurred immediately after a successful dissertation proposal defense and acquisition of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval located in appendix (C). Table 1 shows the alignment of the research question, data sources, and analysis.

Table 1

Research Questions-Data-Analysis Alignment

Research question	Data sources	Analysis
Research Question 1 Life and career experiences	Interviews Memos LEA policies	Provisional coding Categorizing In vivo coding Descriptive coding Connecting themes Theoretical categories
Research Question 2 Fear of harassment or firing	Interview Memos LEA policies	Provisional coding Categorizing In vivo coding Descriptive coding Connecting themes LGBTQ identity politics Boundaries and self-protection Performativity and need for empowerment
Research Question 3 Strategies utilized	Interview Memos LEA policies	Provisional coding Categorizing In vivo coding Descriptive coding Connecting themes LGBTQ identity politics Boundaries and self-protection Performativity and need for empowerment

I used Seidman's (2013) three-part interview series to gather data, conducting three 90-minute sessions with each participant face-to-face. With participants' permission, I digitally audio-recorded interviews to ensure accuracy. Furthermore, recording the interviews allowed me

to take detailed observation notes during interviews, documenting behavior, and nonverbal communications. Seidman (2013) suggested researchers stage interviews thematically into life history, details of the experience, and reflections on meaning.

During and after interviews, I recorded memos. Memos help an interviewer concentrate on the participant, prevent interruptions, and track the interviews' progression (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, note-taking allows an interviewer to document areas of needed clarification and follow-up questions (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). According to Weiss (1994), memos help capture nuances concerning the setting, participants' tone, and nonverbal body language.

Documentation

In addition to interview transcripts, other documents collected were local education agency board meeting minutes, policies, and a 5-year plan. Also included in the data were any other public documents found to be pertinent to the proposed study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), obtaining relevant materials or documents, whether school records or evaluations, is the first step in the qualitative study process.

Memos

The third form of documentation was researcher memos. Seidman (2013) encouraged the use of a field notebook or journaling as a way to understand the topic and research process. Memos and journals help a researcher work through problems, providing a space for reflection, analysis, and self-critique (Maxwell, 2013). Journaling also allows a researcher to make sense of personal responses and identify bias within the process (Seidman, 2013).

Data Analysis

Maxwell (2013) identified the first step in the qualitative analysis as listening to interview recordings before transcription, followed by reading all interview transcripts and other

documents for analysis. At this time, the researcher should "write notes and memos on what [they] hear or see in [the] data" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) asserted that all data collected (e.g., interviews, journals, observation notes, and documents) be read and reviewed with thematic categories, such as heteronormativity, power imbalance, gender nonbinary, and gender performance. Analytic memos underwent systematic arrangement within a qualitative research database. According to Maxwell (2013), qualitative analysis consists of three main components: memoing, categorization, and connecting.

MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software was the tool to transcribe audio recordings and code interview transcripts and observation notes. However, I also kept a written list of structural and emergent codes and their descriptions throughout the research process, as suggested by Saldaña (2016). I created a list of initial codes taken from the research questions and guided interview questions. The initial codes allowed for categorizing large amounts of data and contained words and phrases, including *school climate, rural, homophobic, outness, job security, safety, curriculum, resources,* and *mentorship*.

In addition to initial coding during the first cycle, I used descriptive coding, which is especially suitable for interview data. Descriptive coding provides a means to label and index data from a larger data group with a word or phrase (Saldaña, 2016). In vivo coding, which entailed using the participants' actual words to create codes, was another approach during the first coding cycle, which allows for the focus on large amounts of qualitative data.

Transitioning to the second cycle in the coding process, I used code mapping, as explained by Saldaña (2016). Code mapping provides a tool to elicit codes within the data and create categories related to the research questions. The second coding cycle involved pattern coding to reexamine and assign data into organizational, substantive, and theoretical categories.

According to Saldaña, there may be multiple iterations of coding and categorization during data analysis, and qualitative data analysis software will facilitate the process and provide a measure of accuracy. Therefore, the final cycle showed connections of distinct patterns or themes within the collected data. Glaser (2001) noted, "Saturation is not seeing the same pattern over and over again. It is the conceptualization of comparisons of these incidents which yield different properties of the pattern until no new properties of the pattern emerge" (p. 191). The saturation of information relies on the complexity of the topic and the lack of existing research on the topic.

Issues of Validity

The systematic data collection procedures, multiple data sources, and triangulation help produce credible and trustworthy research (Patton, 2002). Therefore, I used the validity checklist outlined in Maxwell (2013) and the three-interview series approach defined in Seidman (2013). Validity in qualitative research begins with the primary instrument: the researcher (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2014) asserted, "Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account" (p. 201).

To create a valid study, the researcher must ensure that the empirical social world reflected in the study represents the reality and perception of those experiencing the phenomena (Patton, 2002). The two main threats to validity are researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). Validity is a straightforward way to address the correctness and credibility of the description, conclusion, explanation, and interpretation of a study. Maxwell (2013) warned researchers of addressing validity in theoretical terms by using blanket terms such as bracketing, member checks, and triangulation. Therefore, to address validity and establish credibility, I used rich descriptive data from interviews, documentation, memos, and participant reflections.

Through member checking, the participants reviewed the transcribed interviews and validated my interpretation of findings to address any misunderstanding or misinterpretations. Allowing respondent validation and member checks helped me to identify areas of researcher bias.

Data triangulation occurred through the analysis of interview responses, documents, and memos. By using multiple sources of data collection, a researcher helps ensure validity and establish triangulation (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). I created an index of pattern codes influenced by research questions and applied it to all data collection sources to identify recurring themes within the data.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative investigation flows with and through the researcher's relationship with the phenomena or problem. Data come from the researcher, participants, positions of power, and text, together in continual motion (Merriam, 2002). Credible research requires researcher neutrality, with the realization that absolute objectivity is an illusion (Patton, 2002). Therefore, I acknowledged my bias as a heterosexual male educator raised and educated in rural South Georgia who believes that all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, should receive equal treatment. I recognized how my experience could have influenced my perception of qualitative data collected during the interviews and observations. The connection to this study follows.

My interest in issues regarding the equal treatment of LGBTQ students began during the 2011–2012 school year. As a veteran teacher, I faced a situation for which I was not prepared. A female student in my ninth-grade World History course was visibly and audibly sobbing at her desk. When I inquired about the source of her tears, she asked, "Would you kick your daughter out of your home because the person she was in love with was another girl?" I immediately

responded, no. The girl informed me that her father had cast her out of his home, and she was devastated because she considered her relationship with her father, unbreakable. I felt inadequately prepared to deal with the student's situation and compassionately referred her to the school counselor. I began to notice LGBTQ students and realized their numbers had grown considerably from my time in high school.

During coursework for a degree in organizational leadership, I began contemplating the need for school administrators to lead by example because, as noted by Kouzes and Posner (2012), "Titles are granted, but it's your behavior that earns you respect" (p. 16). The positive relationships between faculty and administration provide a role model for student behavior and relationships. Being a cisgender male, I found negative, homophobic reactions within my school system. For example, two female teachers on campus started dating and eventually married. I was taken aback by the school counselor's decision not to address the newlywed teacher by her married name. The counselor, a confidant for the bullied or harassed, was also a pastor's wife and very devout in her belief system. Thus, she chose to call the teacher by her first name rather than seemingly approve of the marriage by using her new, legal last name.

Furthermore, through my characteristics as a 50-year-old heterosexual White male who loves to ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles, social conservatives often assume I share their beliefs. I have witnessed many homophobic slurs and attitudes within my community and school system, much of it coming from school officials and parents who perceived that I felt the same as they did. The intolerant rhetoric was especially intense after the Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. A high school classmate and I examined the number of students we knew from school who had moved away, become open about their LGBTQ status, and rarely returned to their hometown.

Transferability

A basic tenet of qualitative research is transferability, the ability of others to transfer the knowledge gained to a similar situation (Patton, 2002). Qualitative transferability is similar to generalizability in quantitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that "generalizability involves leaving the extent to which a study's findings apply to other situations up to the people in those situations" (p. 255). To address transferability, I employed the most common and accepted approach: rich, thick description to provide the readers with enough information to determine transferability to their situations (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I selected a school district in a low socioeconomic area, as evidenced by Title I funding. The school district was within a rural area of South Georgia, largely dependent on agriculture, agriculture processing, and manufacturing, which allowed me to identify areas where findings of the proposed study may be transferable.

Ethical Issues

Data collection entailed interviewing LGBTQ educators at a Southeast Georgia school district. Research with human participants is a delicate and serious undertaking regulated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Seidman (2013) advised researchers to show respect for individuals, do no harm, minimize risk, and provide selection equality and equal treatment. Seidman further advised that researchers become familiar with 45 CFR 46 on the Protection of Human Subjects. Upon successful completion of the dissertation proposal process, I submitted a request for a review of the study to Valdosta State University, which the IRB approved.

The interview process began following IRB approval. There was a potential for exposure to retaliation, harassment, and other negative consequences, given participants' openness and the

straightforward subject matter. Therefore, I obtained informed consent before interviewing any participant. To address the potential risk to participants and reflect the effort to reduce potential harm, I provided all participants with an informed consent form. The informed consent form provided the purpose, the methodology, and the time frame for the study (Seidman, 2013). Participants had time to ask questions and consider their choice to enter the study. I also advised participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Informed consent covers the risks and benefits of participation in a study. Given the sensitive nature of the study topic, in-depth interviews could have caused emotional distress. To minimize the risk of discomfort, I allowed participants to choose their most comfortable and private location to conduct interviews. I also provided for the secure storage and handling of verbatim transcripts, which could lead to embarrassment or retaliation, and included a modest but realistic description of benefits regarding participation. As suggested by Seidman (2013), I presented benefits in a manner that did not provide undue or unrealistic expectations.

Compensation within the research process is a potential risk. Consequently, no participant received monetary compensation. All interviews took place near the participants' locations, so any travel expenses incurred rested with the researcher. Creating a professional and ethical relationship between researcher and participant is essential to a study's validity. Therefore, I strived to understand the participants' perceptions of me and the research project. Given that I am an entry-level assistant principal within the system, I had to remain neutral, without consideration for my position, advancement, or reduction, as required by the research code of ethics (Patton, 2002).

Lack of confidentiality was a possible risk; thus, I assigned pseudonyms to the participants and did not identify the school system by name. Furthermore, I did not reveal the

school system's specific location, instead indicating the broad geographical reference of Southeast Georgia. During the interview process, I refrained from asking questions that could have provided clues to participants' identities. Furthermore, I disclosed to all participants my position as an entry-level assistant principal within the system and advised in writing I would divulge no portion of the conversations, recorded interviews, or participant identities to any other person within the school system, as required by the code of ethics.

Chapter Summary

School and district leaders struggle to create a positive school climate and work environment for all LGBTQ educators (Wright & Smith, 2015). Rural LGBTQ students are subject to harassment despite recent advances regarding the LGBTQ community at large (Palmer et al., 2012). This study was an exploration of the life and career experiences of veteran LGBTQ educators who work or have worked at an identified rural Southeast Georgia public school district. The selected site reflected a moderate-size school system with a population large enough to garner a sufficient number of participants, provide broad rural geography, and reflect a low socioeconomic population. I used a case study approach.

I used purposeful sampling as outlined by Patton (2002) to recruit five veteran LBGTQ educators within the specific public school district, collecting data following Seidman's (2013) three 90-minute interview procedure. To provide triangulation, I used multiple sources of data, including interview transcripts, researcher memos, and other qualitative documents deemed appropriate. Furthermore, coding all qualitative data was under three levels, as suggested by Saldaña (2016). Above all, I ensured participants' privacy through pseudonyms while following all the guidelines presented by Valdosta State University's IRB.

Chapter IV

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Based on the National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate, LGBTQ educators reported a negative school climate and feared harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et. al., 2019). I explored the lives and career experiences of veteran LGBTQ faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district about having this fear and, if so, what strategies they used to manage their careers. In this chapter, I provide detailed portraits of the five educators identifying within the broader LGBTQ community. The five participants were successful educators, as evidenced by their longevity, self-reported teacher evaluations, and advanced degrees. All participants work or have worked within the identified rural South Georgia school district. Chapter IV presents their experiences as LGBTQ individuals, husbands, wives, and educators establishing successful careers in rural South Georgia.

RA

I met RA in 2011 when I began teaching at the district's ninth-grade campus. We worked in different departments and had limited contact, but I was aware of her circumstances, as I was her wife's mentor teacher during her first year with the system. I was pleased when RA agreed to participate in the study. Our first interview took place in August 2019, with RA choosing her home for the site. She explained that her home was a refuge and place of comfort. Subsequently, all interviews took place at the dinner table, living room, or front porch.

RA grew up in Waycross, Georgia, and graduated from the Waycross City School System. She was a self-professed "band geek" and academic devoted to her studies from an early age. She earned good grades, participated in the school math team, and eventually graduated class salutatorian. RA regarded her friends during high school as a diverse and "interesting group." Her dedication to grades and achievement outweighed any friendships or romantic relationships. She described her middle and high school dating experience as "almost asexual" and explained that she did not participate in any real dating scene; instead, she just "hung out with friends."

RA attended college after graduation and planned to be a doctor, having earned a pre-med biology degree in high school. However, her parents were going through difficult economic times and asked her to stay home and help with the bills. She appreciated sharing what she had learned with others, especially her little sister. RA said, "I felt like there are so many things to know and learn, and I just really loved sharing that with other people." After helping her parents back to economic stability, she continued through graduate school, focusing on education. She explained, "I just thought it was a really amazing profession to be able to transfer knowledge to somebody."

RA taught in both the local private school and the public school system of Statesboro, Georgia, and Huntsville, Alabama, and at Fort Stewart military base. She has also taught in the Rural Youth Development Detention Center and an alternative school setting. Her goal for students was that they think for themselves and have independent thought in both the classroom and social settings. RA related,

> I feel like people often just copy what their neighbor is doing, and it would be just a great day for me if one day in class I'm able to look around, and I feel like all these students are thinking their own thoughts and speaking their own thoughts.

RA was previously married to a man and had one son. The marriage ended in divorce, primarily due to his substance abuse problem. RA referred to herself as gay or lesbian and is currently married to her wife, Jane. Jane is a former art teacher at the school where she and RA met and taught. Jane worked at the school for three years before leaving the teaching profession and pursuing a law enforcement career. RA noted that there was "this instantaneous something" when they met and soon began dating. At first, RA and Jane tried to keep their relationship low-key. RA explained, "I think at some time before we got married, most coworkers knew that we were a couple, but it was still a very guarded thing."

RA and Jane's wedding took place during the school year, so they had to decide which faculty and community members to invite. RA remarked, "That was a big discussion. . . . Should we invite this teacher?" Jane was careful not to put others in what may, for them, have been an awkward position of participating in a gay wedding. "There is always that concern," RA said. "Does it make everybody else feel uncomfortable?" RA also voiced worry regarding the intention of wedding guests, saying, "We were afraid that these people would go and perhaps take pictures . . . [and make] a farce or something, like, "'Hey, look at this. I'm at a lesbian wedding.'" The couple did not kiss at their wedding, something Jane requested. RA noted, "She was a little more hesitant to be more open about our relationship."

The couple sporadically attends the Episcopal church where they were married. However, when they do attend, there is no sense of homophobia or feelings of ostracism. Jane said she knew that feeling found in her small church congregation did not extend to the larger community

because her own family, particularly her father, posed a religious opposition to her relationship with Jane.

> I said, you know, Jane and I are living together. We're engaged, and we're going to get married. So, one day, my dad asked me just out of the blue: "What does the Bible say about your relationship?" My dad, he would wax and wane on his religious views, and for him to throw that out was a very hurtful thing. We had a pretty decent relationship, and we all seem to enjoy hanging out, and it just halted like any kind of communication or relationship between us for a little bit, and then it was like it was never said.

Within the community, Jane was reluctant to show any public display of affection (PDA) to avoid homophobic reactions of community members and be respectful of their values. RA clarified, "For instance, if we are going to Walmart together, we may not even walk side by side or especially not walk hand in hand." RA again noted that she felt compelled to act like any other couple.

> For me, I wasn't trying to cause a reaction, but we're a couple. Why can't we do this? I didn't find it to be offensive or anything, and it was a very long time before she felt comfortable enough to even show that we were a couple, and we still limit PDA.

RA found it was more comfortable visiting other communities to enjoy her wife's company as a couple. "When we're just visiting that community, city, or town, you don't have to worry or think as much just because you're not living there." She found that out of town, they could hold hands and sit close, "whereas here, it's probably just not as frequent because we live here, and we don't want to have to deal with other people rolling their eyes or anything like that."

RA lives in a neighborhood undergoing gentrification, as younger couples buy and remodel the older homes and usually feel safe. However, she recalled an incident in which teenage boys were yelling homophobic slurs near her home. She recalled, "There were people in the park yelling 'faggot,' 'die,' and all that kind of stuff. So, I don't know if I necessarily felt unsafe, so much as it was, I felt our household or property might be unsafe in terms of damaging stuff." RA discovered that one of the boys would be in her class the following semester, and the thought of being his teacher caused her worry and stress.

> All I kept thinking was, this guy knows where I live and has yelled at my wife. I think some people find something to taunt somebody with, [and him] being a student; I was going to have to act like it didn't happen, and . . . treat him like every other kid.

I found RA to be straightforward and matter-of-fact when referencing her outness and marriage to Jane. She said, "For me, maybe it's because I didn't grow up here. I don't know the families. I don't care who you are; I consider this to be our relationship, our marriage. I think very openly and bluntly about it." RA voiced her concern that others within the community and school environment did not acknowledge her marriage. She recalled an event at her son's swim meet in which a family friend failed to refer to her as Jane's wife.

> I've had instances where people are a little hesitant to accept that I'm married to another woman. For instance, I was sitting at one of my son's swim practices, and there was a woman who was friends with Jane's mom, and she was speaking with me. Instead of referring to us as being married or Jane being my wife, she would continually refer to [us] as a special friend. It was never like—it's a matter of just not accepting that we're married.

RA took her wife's last name and confronted those in charge of maintaining the email lists, having to make several requests to have her new last name in her e-mail address. RA wondered if the name update would have taken so much effort and time had she been in a heterosexual marriage. RA was disappointed when coworkers failed to use her new last name, saying, "They either want to refer to me with my previous name or by my first name when that was never really a thing." RA and her wife both aspired to normalize their relationship and status as a married couple in their interactions with the community, faculty, parents, and students. She was disheartened that others did not respond to the fact that she had gotten married, recalling,

> Nobody really congratulated us. Nobody said anything about it. Granted, a lot of people weren't invited to the wedding, but when anybody else on our campus got married or had a kid or had any kind of milestone, there were e-mails nonstop for days.

RA does not announce her relationship status when interacting with faculty, staff, and students on campus. When approached, she addresses questions as a heterosexual wife would, acknowledging her relationship and continuing the conversation. In one interaction with a janitor, RA referred to her wife. The janitor came to her room to clarify what he had heard, then told RA he disapproved of same-sex marriage. RA stated that faculty members who have known her for years would think of her as easygoing and calm. I noticed that RA possessed a quiet and reserved demeanor. Even when communicating frustration, she spoke in a soft and measured tone. With some emotion, RA recalled,

> A teacher that I was friends with prior to Jane just turned her back on me. If I said good morning, she wouldn't respond and just turned her head. I mean, truly, she would turn her head look the other way like I was a ghost.

RA had a close group of friends before her marriage to Jane. Since making her wedding vows, she suffered from relationship loss, ostracism, and the awkwardness of establishing new friendships. She said,

> Teachers are strange. The things that you consider to be just good manners and polite and everything, a lot of times, they don't practice that. Especially with my marriage to Jane. If there's a new teacher on campus or somebody is relatively new, and I speak to them, and they don't address me or look my direction, I do have to pause and think. Is that their personality? Are they just that shy? Or do they have this desire to not talk to me because they know I'm in a relationship with Jane? I don't know, and it sucks to always have to think about that. You know, like, are you rolling your eyes at me because I'm married to a woman? Or is it just because you're an asshole?

In her openness with faculty and staff, RA presented a necessity to acknowledge her marriage. She stated, "Our relationship, our marriage—I think very openly and bluntly about it." However, she required an establishment of trust to get beyond respectful greetings before sharing details of her life.

> If I have a personal relationship with somebody, or they knew us when we were courting on campus or somebody who's been at our house, I feel completely fine just to say, "Jane and I did this" or "Jane and I went to the beach." But there are still other people on campus, and I don't really expand too much on my relationship. I don't know if it's necessarily that I don't want them to feel uncomfortable because I know that they would, or I'm assuming they would because these are the more conservative individuals.

RA noted that when individuals bring up "old-school Christian values" and "getting back to the basics," she finds it "just a way to say, 'I don't really support homosexual relationships.'"

She voiced a concern that Christian-based values, religion, and prayers sanctioned by the school district often brought into question the motives of coworkers and administrators around her. RA stated,

> I think that the only time it's awkward [is] opening prayers. In the back of my mind [is] that a lot of these people who are applauding probably would not support modern relationships. . . . I'm just always worried about, "Am I considered to be immoral?"

RA was the only honors teacher for her department; as such, she was concerned that many of the students she teaches might have parents who are prominent members of the community, public school employees, or district leadership. Regarding her feelings of job security, RA said, "This year, I'm going to have the superintendent's daughter as a student, and I don't know how much board members know. I don't know how much parents know. I think it's pretty well known that I'm in this relationship." RA relayed her insecurities for the upcoming school year: "This year, we are a married, established couple. Is that going to now affect even the way the superintendent not [only] thinks of me but is it going to affect the way that I feel about my job?" She had not faced some of the homophobia others have experienced but questions the impact on job security, stating, "For now I guess I feel safe, but I'm just always waiting for the moment where a student might blurt out something."

RA uses in her classroom what she calls a "healthy paranoia," wondering, "How are the kids going to respond?" She discussed her decision to place a personal photo in her room, like many other teachers.

> We've got a picture that we had taken near our anniversary, and this is a great picture. If I hang that picture in the classroom or during Open House when the parents come in, what's going to happen with that? I mean, I certainly do worry about job security because

> I always have to wonder, "How are they going to respond? How is this going to be received by the student or bother the parents?"

When interacting with students, RA acknowledges her LGBTQ marital status but stated, "I try to minimize [it] as much as possible because then I have to wonder what's going to happen if there is a complaint." Noting the injustice of having to be on guard regarding her marriage as a lesbian, she stated, "That's kind of sad to hear because other people who are in heterosexual relationships don't feel the need to have to do that." When RA does come out to students, it is usually due to questions regarding her spouse's occupation.

> They asked me about my husband: "What does your husband do?" Because they're always going to assume that people are in heterosexual relationships, especially if I'm not trying to fit that stereotypical idea of what you think a gay woman should look like.

Like the community members and faculty, RA is upfront with students when asked about her marriage. Her strategy to deal with student questions or rumors surrounding her marriage to a woman is to provide "verification" and "just move on." She related,

> I got flowers recently for my anniversary. [Students ask], "Wow, what are those for?" I just said, "It's my anniversary." And the kids are like, "Oh, man," and they're happy to see the flowers. Then I get the one student that asked, "Who sent them?" It's like they're trying to make me say something, and I'll say, "My wife did" or "Jane did." Then there are a couple of kids that had these kinds of wild-eyed looks. I think at this point, after a few years, the students—it's almost like it's a rumor that everybody knows it's true. Because I know I hear the things; I'm not imagining. I'll hear some say, "Oh, it is true." It's like nobody will actually say, "She's married to a woman." It's just kind of like, "I think she is," and then they get some verification, and I just move on.

According to RA, a result of her coming out to students is that LGBTQ students "see me as being the go-to gay person on campus. If anything, I think they're just looking for somebody to support them."

RA has also found support in her principal, whom she describes as "lovely, accommodating, and very accepting and open." He was one of the few faculty members who attended her wedding and "was really on board with calling me by my new last name." Her relationship with the assistant principal was not as strong. She admitted, "I always felt that we had a strained relationship anyway." However, RA said, "She does ask about our household how Jane and my son are, that kind of stuff. So, in a way, I guess parents that are supportive." RA recalled feeling supported by the administration before her marriage. "There was a time where I had to take off because I needed to take Jane to the doctor, and there wasn't a problem," RA said. She did not feel her previous administrator was as accepting. She shared, "Because of his strong religious background, he didn't have to say anything, but I knew that he wasn't very supportive of homosexual relationships, but that's just because I already knew of his strong religious convictions."

RA expressed concern that LGBTQ educators did not receive much in the way of resources, saying, "I feel like professional development opportunities . . . there aren't any resources that address homosexual relationships, whether it be the teachers or even the students." She suggested, "Maybe something that they could do is research and see if there's anything available [where] teachers go to a training or read through a pamphlet or something." Regarding support for incorporating LGBTQ issues into the curriculum, RA remarked, "It doesn't exist. I mean, I can't even fathom right now any support of said [LGBTQ] curriculum. I feel like it's still too taboo, just throughout the whole system."

RA felt her heterosexual background allowed her to deal differently with many issues of being a teacher in a same-sex marriage. She stated, “I didn’t have those problems in middle school and high school.” She found it difficult to approach solutions for issues and abuses that many have suffered since their middle and high school days, saying, “What is it that I can do to make things easier for other people? Then I also think it’s hard because I didn’t have that struggle.”

RA feels the school system needs to incorporate cultural competency intervention for students exhibiting homophobic behaviors, particularly harassment. She expressed the desire to have “an [anti]bullying-type activity . . . where the student is at least addressed about it. [I wish] there was something where if a comment was made, whether it’s the negative terminologies that exist today . . . [such as] ‘that’s gay’ or ‘you’re gay.’” She identified the need for “more ways to address and say, ‘That’s unacceptable here’ or ‘Let’s think of another way we can talk about something,’ but there isn’t anything like that.”

Another potentially positive movement to be more inclusive of LGBTQ issues is implementing a formal organization. RA noted, “a previous school I taught had something called Friends of Lesbians and Gays.” She continued, “I had an openly gay student in my class, and he was super excited because it was something where I think he and some other students, some of his friends, approached the principal and asked about having this organization.” The school already had a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports team to encourage optimistic actions in students. She stated,

> If there’s some way that even our [Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports] committee could somehow have this element of recognizing . . . acknowledging that there

is this group of people on campus, and let's actually try to make them feel OK about themselves.

HM

I met HM during a professional development course attended by the different schools throughout the district. I had some awareness of her and her wife, although not through the school system. My knowledge of HM was through her girlfriend, later to be her wife, as I often frequented a restaurant where her wife worked. Our first interview took place in late August 2019. HM stated she felt comfortable having the interview take place on campus. This selection concerned me at first; however, after becoming aware of her high level of outness about her sexual orientation, the location seemed appropriate.

HM was from Rome, Georgia, located in the northwest part of the state, and graduated from the University of Georgia. She described the difference between her hometown and Southeast Georgia" "[Here] it is a little bit more closed-minded because Rome and Athens have a little bit more, I think, diversity, especially Athens. Athens has picked up a lot more diversity than Rome or [this county]." HM did not identify as a lesbian until high school. She explained, "I didn't really know in elementary and middle school, but then I got to high school, and when I was 16 had my first girlfriend. Yeah, I didn't tell anybody." The first person she came out to was a best friend. HM stated, "We broke up, and then I told my best friend, and she's a really big Christian." Her voice slowed as she described the experience. "I didn't know how it would go over, but we've been friends were since like kindergarten, and she was just really supportive and accepting, really helped me through that tough time," she said. HM, dated guys for the remainder of her high school career; however, she noted, "When I went to UGA, I went back to the women." She described her closeted experience in high school.

> I couldn't tell my mom, or I felt like I couldn't tell my mom. The next closest person to me was my best friend. I think that's why it was kind of rough. I didn't know if my family would accept me. [I was] just hoping my friends would, and she did; it was fine. So, I think that's what made it rough is because the person who I was closest to I couldn't tell them what was going on. And my mom was constantly, "What's wrong with you? You've lost weight. You're withdrawn," and I just couldn't come out and tell her. [I said], "I think I need to go see somebody." And she's like, "No, you need just wait about two weeks. And if you feel like you do, in 2 weeks, then you can," and then I just, eventually after like a month, I got better, back to normal.

HM admitted that aside from telling her mother, becoming involved in school activities and sports helped distract her from issues of sexual orientation and allowed her to cope. She explained that she did not encounter much homophobic harassment in her K-12 education, stating, "Once some of my high school friends found out, they were more . . . accepting than I thought they would be." She did not experience homophobia during that time, recalling, "Teacher or peer-wise, not really." She recognized that the teachers might have just kept their thoughts and opinions to themselves, whereas her fellow students "were accepting." HM confessed, "I was a semi-popular kid. You know, 'We already know you're pretty cool.'"

HM signed up for teaching classes in high school. She recalled, "I had this terrible teacher when I was a senior in high school. It was an elective teaching class. I just want[ed] to be somebody who could, in a way, counter that." In college, she tried nursing but found it to be "disgusting" and did not have "the stomach," changing her major to teaching. She explained, "I always liked going to school . . . Why not just continue doing what I already like to do, which is going to school."

HM's first job in the district was teaching middle school math. When she first moved to the area, she did not disclose her sexual orientation to anyone. Faculty members would often try to set her up with single men in the area. Her response was to "brush it off" and focus on her skills as a math teacher. However, a coworker introduced HM to her sister. "She didn't even know I was gay, but I don't think I hide it very well." The two began dating and soon became a couple; as a result, more people in the community became aware of her sexual orientation. The couple then decided to have a child and ultimately to marry. HM became pregnant through in vitro fertilization before same-sex marriage became legal. She stated, "We didn't know it was going to be legalized. I was five months pregnant when we found out we could get married."

HM's pregnancy was during the time she worked at the middle school. She recalled having a baby shower at the school.

> It was fun. Two other girls were pregnant, and we all had one [baby shower] together. My son got just as much as everybody else's child got. I mean, everybody treated me the same as anybody else. Once people found out that I was in a same-sex relationship, even before I got married, nobody ever said anything to me about it. When we got pregnant, nobody here at the middle school ever said a thing out of the way about it, faculty or administration. So, I guess those fears that they talk about are internal.

HM described her current school district as in a very Christian area, "probably the most Christian place I've ever lived in my life." The area has become more open to LGBTQ individuals during the last decade. However, she recalled an experience with the religious calling of a coworker's perception of her self-isolation, saying, "She wrote me a letter and left me $250 because God had laid it on her heart that I needed that money because I didn't eat with them on Fridays." HM noted that she was agnostic and that much of the conservatism of the area felt

pushed. “Things have happened where you push even further back, in the closet.” HM was hesitant to say anything to her coworkers, stating, “You don’t know how other people are going to react.”

After getting married, HM left the middle school to teach math at a small, rural elementary school within the district. Not long after, an administrator called HM to her office regarding a parent complaint. The administrator was the wife of a Southern Baptist minister who had reportedly called the middle school, upset that she had not known HM was married to a woman before hiring her. HM described her confrontation with the elementary school principal.

> They said, “Somebody saw you kissing a woman out in the parking lot.” I said, “You’ve got cameras all around this building. You can look at your cameras and see if that’s true or not because it wasn’t true. I guess then they knew because I was like, “Yeah, that’s my wife. I kiss my wife.” I mean, that’s who it would be. It made me feel very ostracized. It made me feel weird because I just don’t feel like if it were a straight couple, that would even happen. A parent wouldn’t even call the school if it had been a man and a woman.

When HM told the elementary school principal she was married to a woman, the lines of communication immediately shut down. HM stated, “She literally avoided me. She didn’t even speak to me in the hallways.” HM revealed that the incident followed a casual conversation regarding her wife and stated, “Two months into my job, during my planning, I said something to the extent [that] I had to go do something for my wife; I’ll be right back.” HM felt ostracized and attributed her decision to leave the school to her principal’s reaction.

When asked about administrators’ influence on her feelings of job security, HM said she had not perceived her job was in jeopardy. She stated, “I never, ever felt like I didn’t have job security.” HM included the elementary school from which she left, continuing, “Regardless of

how an administrator felt, I've never felt that it influenced my job." HM did voice concern of being unsupported by the elementary school administrator, stating, "Instead of supporting me, they called me and interrogated me when they have cameras all over the school."

HM began teaching math at the alternative school, a smaller school where all the faculty knew of her marriage. She acknowledged, "The only thing I was semi-concerned about was an internal concern that the principal [at the alternative school] is super Christian." HM's worries regarding her new principal dissolved when she eventually came out to all staff and students following a prompt from her new leader. She described coming out in front of faculty and students:

> I never really came out with my students until some of them knew because their parents knew me, or their parents knew my wife. Some of them knew and would talk about it, but if anyone ever brought it up, I always said, "Stop talking about our personal life," until this year. My principal wanted us all get up and talk about ourselves. Everybody got up, and they're talking like I'm married to my husband. We were married X, Y, and Z. So, this year, I said, "I've been married to my wife for five years. We have a little boy," and so all my students know this year if they didn't already know.

HM pointed out her experience that "in any school system, not just this one, they'll have pictures of family and stuff up. I've never felt comfortable doing that because gay marriage has only been legalized for four years." She said displaying the photo felt "good because I feel like I've been hiding it, and it's just to the point I didn't want to hide it anymore." She added, "If everybody else was going to talk about their personal life, then I've every right to talk about mine." This incident was the first time in 10 years of teaching that HM publicly acknowledged her wife and son. According to HM, it was "scary. . . . Straight couples don't feel the fear."

HM enjoys helping students suffering from what she referred to as "school fatigue," asserting, "I like building those relationships. When I worked at the middle school, we couldn't do that as much because of the workload and the student load." HM discussed her satisfaction with the small school, stating, "This school that I'm at, we only have 15 kids. That's the most meaningful thing, to try to get them back on track [at] school." She found positive teacher-student relationships based on honesty. "Now that I can say, 'That's my wife," where before I would say, family member. [You] feel what you're doing is lying and not letting yourself build that relationship. You got to let go of that." HM emphasized that she was trying to live the most honest life she could within a conservative community's confines.

Reflecting on support from the community for LGBTQ individuals, HM said, "I feel like it is more unaccepted in the community than accepted." HM based her conclusion on the current sodomy laws, comments regarding marriage being between a man and a woman, and overall Christian conservatism. She also described the feeling and mood of the community as "don't ask and don't tell." She stated, "I feel like those real conservative Christian [values] hang over this county, in particular. It is intimidating." HM felt the community wanted citizens to conform to certain standards; as a result, "I wouldn't just go anywhere in the county and just profess my sexuality by any means." Consequently, HM and her wife also limit their intimacy when they are out within the community.

> I would probably not hold my wife's hand in public in the community where we live. When we meet up, we might give each other a kiss on the cheek out in the parking lot or something like that, but not holding hands, not in public. If we go somewhere else, like Jacksonville or Valdosta, where people don't know who we are, we hold hands. A lot of people know who we are in the community. We don't do it here, and I think part of it is, I

> hate to say, but part of it is trying to respect that people do have their beliefs, even though I'm not being respected, but it's a little line you've got to toe.

HM felt that within the school district's community, she could not be 100% herself without repercussions.

HM often overheard what community members said about others when they did not know who they were. Hearing them make comments about other people made her feel less inclined to be open about her sexuality. She explained that she did not feel safe within a community that does nothing to promote acceptance of its LGBTQ individuals, continuing,

> I have had friends that have had stuff that happened to them because of their sexuality, both men and women. It's in their family or with their friends when they were growing up that things happened to them. I'm not necessarily saying they got beat up, but definitely stuff, verbal abuse, and stuff like that has happened. So that makes you take a step back. And that happens in the community happens with our kids that we teach.

When asked about the LEA's influence on her feelings of support and job security, HM asserted that the local board of education did not give her any reason to think she would lose her job due to her LGBTQ status. She continued, "I don't feel like it would be because of that." She thought that if the LEA needed to reduce the number of teachers, the selection process would be very objective. HM said she did not interact with the LEA office outside of the superintendent and assistant superintendent of schools. She stated of the LEA,

> I don't think [they] do anything necessarily to support, but also there hasn't been anybody I don't think who has gone out of their way to, for instance, make a club. So, if they were to make a club, would the board support it, would they allow it? I don't know. I feel like that would be where the rubber meets the road.

HM expressed doubt about the LEA's support for her and LGBTQ issues in the face of community opposition. She felt the agency would address community backlash ahead of her rights. HM stated, "I feel like if it was a big enough issue, with certain groups in the community . . . I would not have support, and that community member would come before me."

About faculty, HM said she "definitely doesn't feel supported." During collaboration meetings, there were definite cliques and friend groups; however, she never felt that her ideas were "put down" due to her sexuality. She explained, "It's more like indifferent, and I never felt one way or the other when it comes to collaborating with them or discussing ideas because it always it's about, for instance, math." HM added, "I will say that, in general, the faculty actually does a lot better than anybody else in the community."

When asked how she felt parents and students supported LGBTQ educators, she repeated that a parent complaint resulted in her decision to leave the elementary school. However, she implied that things could be worse, reporting, "If was way more flamboyant about my sexuality, I definitely think it would be a problem with the parents and students." Although she does not hide her sexual orientation well, she feels there is a point at which being outspoken and easily identifiable is a liability. She explained, "It's not like I have to temper it or anything. It's just not my personality. But I feel like [flamboyance] would be a problem with parents. I feel like I would probably lose my job by doing things like that."

HM felt that parents were the least likely to promote safety for LGBTQ individuals and the teaching profession in her county. HM acknowledged that her skepticism of religion influenced her perception, stating, "I just feel like it has a lot to do with the religious aspect of it." She expanded on her fears:

> I feel like people who are on the board, in administration, or superintendents are a little bit more educated about [LGBTQ issues] than, for instance, your Joe Blow out there in the community who may have dropped out of high school or might just have a high school education. They just fall back on religion, and they're a lot scarier to me and my safety.

HM felt that students were more accepting of LGBTQ teachers and students than their parents. She explained, "I feel that parents are super conservative, and the kids aren't as much." HM views students as the pathway to increased acceptance of LGBTQ issues. She stated, "I think that the kids are way more accepting than they were ten years ago, and so hopefully, that'll trickle up as they graduate, and hopefully the county will be more accepting."

HM also discussed mentoring students in the past and a willingness to do so in the future, given a structured organization. She recalled,

> I had [coached] two gay girls, and I talked to them a lot. There is a different dynamic than being their teacher and being their coach. I think you'd have a lot more interaction on a personal level with their parents than with them. Also, we have a boy at our school. He is very flamboyant, and he's all the time asking me stuff, now that I'm open to everybody.

HM is cautious when talking to or mentoring students, especially LGBTQ students. She does not want to jeopardize her job due to how her parents may react. HM explained, "I just don't want to put myself in that situation to tell a kid one thing, but their families are raising them another way." However, HM noted, "If we have a club or anything like that, I would definitely do it. But the parents would have to give consent."

According to HM, a more equitable future for LGBTQ educators comes through increased education and tolerance. She recommended toning down religious rhetoric, and "they

should probably be more secular in their delivery in any meeting." HM felt the use of "real conservative Christian" language singled out the LGBTQ community. She stated, "I think that would help LGBTQ people feel more inclusive, not as ostracized. Whether [people] mean to come off that way or not, [they do]."

Furthermore, HM thought that advances to make LGBTQ educators feel more included should come from the top. She expressed that pockets of the school system and community at large followed the old army rule of "don't ask, don't tell," a mindset that "makes you feel like you can't be 100% yourself without repercussions." Professional development or cultural competency training could help educate administration and faculty. HM elaborated,

> We could provide learning. I mean, we have book studies, so that would be one way. You can provide a book study on LGBTQ [issues]. It could be fiction or nonfiction, [it] doesn't matter. Everybody struggles; everybody can relate to a struggle. Whether you're gay, straight, whatever religion you are, everybody has a struggle. The cultural competency training we've had, it's been more toward Black males, so it would be nice to head off some that with LGBTQ [issues]. It would be nice to already have [that] training in place to make sure that it doesn't happen, or how can we help these students, or these adults even, feel more included.

EJ

EJ is from a small town in rural Southeast Georgia, home to just over 300 residents. He described a town isolated from others in rural South Georgia by distance and opportunity. He lamented, "There's just no opportunity once you graduate; all the industry is kind of closed." The community surrounding EJ's hometown school was, in his words, "close-knit but redneck." EJ found members of that community were content to work nine-to-five jobs and did not necessarily

have an education. He attributed their complacency to the lack of opportunities available to people in larger towns.

EJ has taught fifth grade and middle school, with the bulk of his 26 years of experience in preschool special education. His plan was to enter the television industry and become a broadcast journalist; therefore, he earned an undergraduate degree in telecommunications and theater. EJ completed an internship at a TV station in North Florida, at which time he realized how difficult it would be to obtain employment in his desired field. EJ's father passed away ,ten days before his graduation, and he returned home to help care for his mother. He decided to return to college and earn a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and, later, a Master's degree in Special Education.

EJ knew early on that he was gay but waited until he was 25 years old to come out. People in his hometown did not readily talk about LGBTQ issues. He found it difficult to speak to his mother and brother about his sexual orientation. EJ explained, "My brother is a big redneck, so we don't talk about it, and I think my mom's religious system is one reason." He felt accepted growing up in the small, rural town, which he attributed to close connections within the community. EJ explained, "I think definitely if I did not grow up there, it would be more difficult. I think if someone moved in that was gay, [they] probably wouldn't be as supported as me being born and raised there."

At the age of 21, EJ was the only pre-K teacher at the small rural school he had attended as a child. His first classroom consisted of nine students, with a paraprofessional teacher assistant when EJ taught in pre-K. EJ reminisced about his experience at the small rural school, saying, "It was kindergarten through seventh grade. We had the biggest class of 12 [students], and my brother had the smallest [class] of six." He explained that the school was rural, and everyone

knew everyone. “I could say, ‘Hey, I know your mom; if you don’t do right, I can just give her a call. . . . It was a great first experience,” EJ stated. He admitted that he would still be teaching there if the school had not closed due to the small number of students in attendance.

EJ taught one year at an elementary school in a neighboring county, where he experienced homophobic harassment. He admitted the current rural school system he has worked with is “totally different” than his experience in the neighboring county, about which he said,

> They have a lot of good old boys. I taught fifth grade there. They questioned me; I barely was approved to begin, and then after the year, even though I had all excellent evaluations, they didn’t renew my contract. The Board of Education [was] a bunch of good old boys—I hate to say that—and one of them was the chairman of the board. He only had a GED. So that’s just ironic that someone with a GED not saying, “That’s bad,” but said I was a bad example. I’m an educated person [who] at that point is working on my doctorate. So how do you just say that I’m a bad example of a person? They wouldn’t tell me [the reason] at that point, but I knew that’s what it was. I remember one of my coworkers came up to me and said that they were questioning my sexuality. I was like, “Wow. I’m doing a good job, and I don’t understand that.”

The incident in the neighboring county happened over 19 years ago; however, EJ recalled it with emotion and disdain. The nonrenewal of his contract was a pivotal point in EJ’s role as an LGBTQ educator in rural South Georgia, and he often compared his experiences at other systems to this event. He stated, “I would probably do things a little bit differently if it had been at that point right now in my life. I would definitely pursue it legally at this point.”

EJ has worked with the identified school district for almost 20 years. He attributed his longevity within the system and community to the relationships established over the years and his dedication to being the best educator possible. He explained,

> When I first started, I only had a few close friends because I was at the middle school, and we had 150 teachers or whatever. I did special education, so we're kind of in a field of our own. So, I didn't really have that many close friends, and I didn't feel as comfortable as I do now. But now that I work in a smaller environment with just a few people, I feel more accepted.

EJ described his relationship with the special education director as especially close. He frequently engages in activities beyond school, such as camping and attending holiday events. He clarified, "We do things together, me and especially the director. . . . We go off camping with my gay boyfriend, her husband, and [her] kids. I think they tried to include me as much as possible . . . so they include me outside of school."

During our interviews, EJ emphasized his desire for recognition of his ability and skill as an educator. He stated, "They know me, and what a good job I do, so I think that I'm in a secure place with that, and that's just me doing my great job. Being gay or straight has nothing to do with it." EJ contended that he provided 100% effort, no matter what he was doing. When he first joined the school system, he felt the need to prove himself, "maybe overcompensate." He wanted others to see him as "being a good worker, a good teacher, a good educator instead of just being a gay person." EJ noted that 26 years into education, he feels his work provides an example, but that the pressure to perform helped him compensate for his sexual orientation.

EJ believed individuals hold teachers and educational professionals to a higher standard than the rest of the community. He explained,

> Educators are held to a little more a higher standard than my friends that are in different types of careers; it is a little bit different. They're not too worried about losing their job. If I'm off work on a Tuesday and someone sees me, they may ask, "Why aren't you at work?" Someone that works at Walmart, and they're not at work on a Tuesday, they don't think about it. So, I think education is probably a hard profession for some to go into because of that. Because you're always going to be scrutinized and looked upon differently than someone in a different career, which I think is a good thing. I think that educators should be held higher than in some of those professions because you're dealing with children, especially young children. So. you want to be positive.

EJ extended this rationale to his personal life. His boyfriend lives in another state. EJ did not live in the community in which he worked and did not socialize within the school district. EJ noted that his few gay friends would often socialize in larger surrounding towns. He said,

> [My boyfriend and I] just kind of stick to ourselves. We have a lot of friends, and then we have a few gay friends that we do things with. And most of that would be going out of town. Even if there's a bunch of gay people at a restaurant here, I think you would have some confrontation. So, we're not going to bring a lot of attention to ourselves. We would do something, like go out of town, to socialize.

EJ portrayed the school district as a relatively safe place. He was not aware of any "gay-bashing" or similar violence against the LGBTQ community. The bulk of his experience was limited to harassing comments. According to EJ, "Most people say little snide remarks. . . . I'm not deaf. I hear little things. I'm a bigger person; [I'm] not going to let some little sixth grader saying something ruins my day or even redneck at Walmart."

EJ has found a modicum of safety within the rural school district's small community. After working over 19 years for the school district, he has established many relationships that offer security from harassment by people with contrary beliefs. EJ explained, "Knowing somebody is very helpful. They're not going to say something when you are over there talking to somebody that probably a lot of people in the community know." He acknowledged that his relationships with people outside of school and from having taught children or just doing things in the community were invaluable regarding feelings of safety and security.

According to EJ, his work environments were supportive; however, he did not see the community as supportive of LGBTQ educators. He reasoned, "I think it's just not talked about here in the South." EJ noted that he knew a couple of LGBTQ individuals and that, like himself, a small group knows their sexual orientation, "but we do not talk about LGBTQ issues." He stated, "They would defend me if anybody said anything, obviously, but we just don't talk. I think that's just our culture."

EJ discussed his perception of the culture of religion within the community. Although he regularly attended church when he was growing up, as he got older, his attendance declined significantly. He explained, "I think we're at different points in our lives. If you're gay, you're going to burn in hell, so then it's kind of hard to justify going to church all the time. That's in the back of your mind." However, he had not experienced any negativity when returning to church after he had come out. He related,

> I've gone to church even since I've come out and it's been OK. Because I think most people that are where they need to be in church are just glad that you're there and are not trying to judge you. So, not having anything confrontational experienced myself. If they

> think [negatively], some of them may keep it to themselves, but I don't see that as an issue.

EJ's perceptions of the local board of education and the supporting administration were positive. Most members of the board of education of his current system look out for the well-being of the community and the kids. He felt that the local board would not get caught up in "little things, like who you sleep with." According to EJ, his current board of education looks at the educator's performance as opposed to the neighboring county, with overarching influence by the voters. EJ stated, "Here, I think that they're basically doing a good job. I think that the larger areas are more concerned about doing what's right than trying to please their neighbor." EJ summarized his view of the local school board:

> Obviously, they're not blind. They know that I am [LGBTQ]. I don't think that it is an issue, but I don't think they're going to offer any different treatment for me or are going to go beyond what they should for me. I think that they're going to do right, regardless of sexual preference, which I think is good. I don't want to be treated any differently than someone else, and I don't think you should. I think you should do a great job. Regardless of who you sleep with, if you're not doing your job, you shouldn't have that position. That should be the way it is everywhere, but unfortunately, it's not. But here I think it is. But that's who we had elected now who's to say.

EJ believed "everybody" at the board office seemed to build positive relationships. He stated that during large meetings, the superintendent "always comes up to me. It may just be he's just a personable person, but it does seem like a good thing. I like to be included, but I don't know that he's even conscious of that."

The school administrators also made him feel included. EJ said, “I think that people like me, for whatever reason. I’m friendly to them, a good person, good teacher, or whatever. So being gay is just really not at the forefront of things.” EJ reflected that his sexuality had probably opened doors and allowed him to know people in a way not available to a straight man. He stated, “Maybe some of the women wouldn’t be as close to me as they are. They don’t feel threatened, definitely.” EJ gets along with women better than men. Women surround him; all but one elementary principal is female, and the special education department is largely women-dominated. EJ stated, “The women are asking me for fashion advice or things like that. It’s like I said: I have a better relationship with them than men. It’s kind of awkward.”

EJ perceived that some male faculty members kept their distance or avoided close contact. He stated, “I do think some situations where there are males that think they know [my sexual orientation]; they kind of keep their distance or whatever.” For instance, he recalled, “We had a new coach, and I wanted to tell him, ’You’re not going to catch it by shaking my hand or walking near me.’” EJ attributed their evasive behavior to ignorance or lack of interaction with members of the LGBTQ community. He qualified, “I’ve not had that happen very often, but somewhat.”

EJ claimed to be conscious of his words and actions. He has found that keeping a cautious skepticism of others’ intentions and a focused effort to manage his professional behavior an invaluable strategy to become and remain a successful LGBTQ educator. He recalled a situation in which a special-needs child not in his class was crawling on the playground and got bitten by ants. The irate father confronted him. EJ recalled, “The dad called and said, ‘Why did I let his child do that, Mr. EJ, or Miss EJ, or whoever the hell you are.’” The

child's grandmother returned to apologize, and EJ noted that the man could be "just a redneck" or may have never met anyone gay.

Homophobic incidents involving parents have shaped how EJ monitors his behavior. EJ has to deal with the scrutiny faced by all educators while also guarding against homophobia. He explained,

> I think that you have to limit yourself in what you do or say because parents or anyone could take that as being one way or another—the same way when I was in the classroom, and I changed diapers. I was always aware when I was changing someone's diaper that I had one of my paraprofessionals or someone with me because I don't want anybody to say, "Hey, that gay man changed my son's diaper" or something. Obviously, I'm aware of things, because no matter what I'm doing when I try to think about if someone's watching me, what would their perception be?

EJ often heard homophobic comments, such as "gay" and "queer," from students as he walked through the halls of the elementary and middle schools. He admitted to carrying himself a bit differently than other male teachers. Specifically, EJ has a love of fashion and spends a substantial amount of money on his wardrobe; therefore, he would stand out in most groups in South Georgia. If and when students under his charge made discriminatory comments regarding sexual orientation, he would say something like, "We need to be more respectful." However, EJ felt that to be overly confrontational would not be productive. Early in his career, he admitted to being somewhat of a hothead and may have said responded to a student doling out homophobic comments; however, he no longer allowed himself to be pulled into confrontations with homophobic individuals.

> I'm not dumb, I can hear when I walk down the hallway and especially, with middle school kids, you hear little things, but I don't let it worry me. It used to be I would have had a smart mouth and say something back to them, but I've matured, and I'm not going to do that, but I think they're just funny or cute.

EJ is not out to students and does not discuss his personal life. He teaches elementary students and feels that there is no reason his sexual orientation should come up in discussions around the children. He stated, "I don't think you should be that close to your students. Just me personally, working with young people, it should never come out if you're straight, gay, or whatever." EJ noted that if he were teaching at the college level, he might open up about his sexual orientation; however, "in public education, I don't think there's a place for it."

During our discussion regarding the mentoring of LGBTQ students, EJ voiced compassion for students struggling with sexual identity. He reflected, "When I was even in kindergarten, as I reflect on things at that time, I was obviously [gay]." He observed that students were coming out at a younger age, finding it a good thing that kids knew who they were. EJ was able to identify the students who were likely gay. He lamented the absence of resources to help them and his inability to understand at what age to offer help. EJ cautiously outlined how he would approach helping a student.

> I think you have to have the parents on board. I wouldn't want to speak to some kids about anything that their parents are not aware of is going on. I think that parents should be involved in it to whatever degree is necessary. If a student was maybe having issues with themselves, and they came to me in a respectful manner and in a private way, maybe I'll talk to them some more about it. If there's someone that I thought was struggling with their own identity, maybe I could help them in that way.

EJ acknowledged there could be a benefit in having a group, such as a GSA, to provide resources for students struggling with their sexual identity, especially regarding suicide. On the other hand, he was skeptical of the school system taking part in any organization addressing LGBTQ issues. He explained, "I think that's hard when the school steps in. They have different expectations from the community and especially from parents. An agency that's not involved with the school, I think, would have an easier time dealing with things."

EJ expressed his sexual orientation through his nonverbal expressions, tone of his voice, and attention to style. He is comfortable with those around him assuming his LGBTQ status, as he illustrated: "Obviously they're not blind; they know that I am." EJ presented himself as a battle-tested LGBTQ educator who had come to terms with his identity as a gay man and a teacher. He said,

> I'm at a point in my life where I think things happen for a reason. I think that I am here because I'm a better person. I think from [my previous experiences], now I stand up for myself. Not only stand up for myself, I stand up for kids. At [their age], I was kind of shy and not as resilient as I am now. I would just take things that people said, and now I'm like, "Stand up for whatever's right, regardless of whoever it's probably going to piss off."

TM

I became aware of TM through a mutual friend who suggested him as a potential participant in the study. We met in the summer of 2018, and he agreed to share his experiences as a successful LGBTQ educator having over 25 years in the field of education. TM asked that we meet in his classroom after school hours for the interviews. Each time we met, he presented a calm and soft-spoken demeanor, in stark contrast to his large frame and above-average height.

TM had known from an early age that he wanted to be a teacher and that he was different from the other boys with whom he attended elementary school. He explained that teaching "has always been in my blood from the very beginning. I was a very good student. It just came naturally to me." He knew he wanted to be a teacher as early as first grade and was always helping people. Teachers often placed him with other students to tutor them. "I always just loved it," TM confessed. He would frequently go home after school and play school. "I would always be the teacher," he added. TM looked up to his mother's siblings who were teachers. He joined Future Teachers of America in high school and became president of the North Carolina chapter of the organization.

TM knew from an early age that he was different and often the subject of homophobic harassment. He recalled,

> It was a constant thing. Absolutely constant. Honestly, I don't know how they knew, but kids know. They're super intuitive, because there were some kids that I feel like were a lot more effeminate than I was. I certainly was not coming on to anybody. So, I don't know how they knew, but they knew. And so, from the beginning, from kindergarten, people tried to pick on me, but luckily, I was always bigger, and I was able to fight it off. [One time], a group of boys . . . pinned me down, and they peed all over me. They said, "You like dick so much, here," and they peed all over me. I just had a lot of it, but what I did was, when that happened, I grabbed one of the boys, and I beat the crap out of him.

TM's voice belied his emotion as he told this story of abuse. He stated, "I don't know that I ever lost a fight. I had to fight and see that it goes against who I am. I hate confrontation. I hate conflict; I hate it with a passion." TM found during his K-12 years that he had to create "a

huge explosion" to stop other students, or they would "pick you to death." Luckily, during that time, he just got paddled, and they did not tell his parents.

TM described himself as introverted, as he does not care for large crowds. He felt his friends would say he was a caring person. He said, "I am a very compassionate, kind person to almost to a fault. I'm very organized, very structured." He described himself as a driven person with a deep respect for authority. TM credited the U.S. Army for instilling appreciation for teamwork, a sense of duty, and structure that carried over to his role as a teacher. TM achieved the rank of Sergeant E-5 in the North Carolina National Guard and attended the Primary Leadership Development Course in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. TM was enlisted before "don't ask, don't tell," serving from his senior year in 1985 until 1991.

TM's first teaching job was in North Carolina, where he taught sixth grade English and social studies. He learned early that he "needed to have separation" between his school life and personal life. TM had been out since he was 18 years old and just assumed it would be OK. He added that he was in a period of naiveté when a parent called and questioned his sexual orientation. TM stated, "She says [my son] doesn't like you because you don't like him. Are you gay?" He advised her that he did not think this was an appropriate question, and noted that after his first year as a teacher, he saw how quickly "it blows up."

TM eventually gained a position as a guidance counselor at a local community college in North Carolina, a position he held for 5 years. He found the job emotionally draining, reporting, "It eventually wore my batteries down because I'm such an emotional person. . . . You have to, as a counselor, disconnect to some degree, and that was really hard on me." TM felt he did a good job as a counselor, but dealing with depressed people was a difficult challenge.

TM moved to Georgia with his partner of 30 years. His partner had earned a degree in art marketing management and obtained a position as director of an art museum and heritage center located in Southeast Georgia. With a doctorate in higher education administration, TM found employment in an administrative role at a community college. He thought when he was a counselor that he might want to become an administrator; however, he found that the administrator role required a "totally different skill set." He found it to be an undesirable position, saying, "I was miserable. You have adults arguing and everything back and forth. The laws are very strict. You can't just fire somebody. So, I really hated that."

During his time in administration overseeing the counseling department at the Southeast Georgia community college, TM experienced another instance of homophobia. A coworker whom he had mentored and established a friendship with soon became his superior. The college held a family picnic for faculty and staff, "encouraging us to bring family." He brought his partner to the picnic, and everything changed. "[My now-supervisor] started reassigning my duties. She was going to move my office outside. I had a really nice office, and she was going to move it around back. . . . She was definitely getting rid of me." The only thing that had changed was that TM had brought a man to the family picnic, after which he realized, "They didn't mean *that* family." This event shaped the way he viewed relationships and school events. He recalled,

> I guess in looking back, there were a couple of other coworkers there that were gay that didn't bring their spouses or their partners. I just felt I guess I was little lulled into a sense of security, false sense of security. And I learned from that.

TM wanted to return to the classroom after his misery-filled 3 years in administration. However, this was during the Great Recession, and there were no jobs in schools. The only teaching job he could find was in the prison system. TM spent the next four years teaching at a

prison about 30 miles from his home, where "I really loved that job." TM taught the highest-level GED course to the inmates. He explained, "If the pay had been better, I probably would have still been there; I enjoyed it."

Being from North Carolina, TM had not known Georgia increased teachers' pay if they held a doctorate. A retired teacher informed him that he would gain a substantial pay increase if he taught in the public school system. "She said, 'Here's what you'd be making,' and it was double what I was making," he stated. It was then that he applied for and obtained a position teaching language arts within the system examined in this study.

The system was close to the prison; as a result, the distance from his home allowed me to maintain a private life and a personal life. He discussed an experience that clarified the need to have not only a separation in communication regarding his work and personal lives but also a geographic separation.

> I worked at an elementary school right near where I lived. It was like two or three blocks away from my house, and the kids would say, "Why is it that there's always a guy in a red truck, getting in and out of his truck in front of your house?" So, it just is a lot easier. I mean, it's harder on my car and harder on me to drive, but it just it's snuffed a lot of questions. I don't drive 2 hours a day and pass by about 50 schools by pure accident.

Hired by the school's new principal, TM immediately started feeling out the culture of the school. His first concern was that the prior principal had a confrontation with a gender-fluid crossdressing student. "He just raked that kid over the coals and said, 'You know, if you dress like that, I can't protect you.' Immediately, my guard went up with that instance," TM stated.

TM found friendship in an academic coach working at his new school. He overheard the academic coach saying gay-positive things and recognized her as an ally. He reported, "She was

a friend of mine very early on. We both discovered within the first week that I worked here that we were Democrats, we were liberal, and that we were in the minority." He found that he would have to rely on his new friend for advice at a pivotal and trying time.

TM had not revealed to anyone except the academic coach his sexual orientation the first year of his employment, which he described as "a very lonely time." He was, however, forced to come out to select coworkers and administrators when his partner of 30 years became sick and died. He and his partner had been together since high school. TM had convinced his partner to see the doctor due to foot cramps, where he received a diagnosis of arterial sclerosis.

> His arteries were just clogged, and so he went from, in a two week period, foot cramps to dead. And so, of course, that was horrifyingly tragic. I've never been alone in my life because I went from my mother's house, in high school, to live with him. So I was totally lost and just devastated.

The first person TM went to for advice was the academic coach with whom he had established a relationship. He recalled thinking,

> Okay, I'm gonna have to talk to somebody. Who do I talk to talk to, the assistant principal? Do I talk to the principal directly? She said, "I think they're both going to be fine, but I think the principal, her son is gay and she would be the best one to go to."

TM's need for support escalated, as his twin sister and mother also died that same year. He reflected on the support he received from the administrators and faculty during that year, reporting that principal was helpful. He explained, "We still limited our conversations to be very generic, which I appreciated, because at that time, it was hard for me to deal with them, but they were very supportive. I couldn't have asked for better."

He described that year as “horrible.” TM stayed in this room most of the time. His coworkers would take his students to the lunchroom, which was a tremendous help. “I’m not exaggerating. For like a month I just cried nonstop, and it was in front of the kids; it was in front of everybody. I could not do otherwise. I was going to grief counseling,” TM described the excruciating loss of his family.

> It’s like when you cut your arm off, there’s going to be blood coming. That’s what was happening. I was bleeding all over the place. So, at that point, it was like, what more can be taken from me. The only thing I had was my job, because it felt like everything had been taken. I guess I was just lucky that nobody ever called me on anything like that; everybody was supportive, at least to my face.

A science teacher went around to other faculty members and collected money to help TM. “She initiated it, so it kind of made me feel like she was friendly,” he remarked. TM acknowledged that he did not know many of the faculty’s personal beliefs. A lot of them, he felt, did not discuss their beliefs because of his known or presumed sexual orientation.

Although TM knew little of his coworkers’ personal beliefs and was forced out by events beyond his control, he did find support. The assistant principal allowed TM to use videos and movies in class. He credited the principal, assistant principal, and academic coach’s allowances as factors that helped him through that time. He stated, “A lot of movies—that’s what got me through it.”

TM credited his reliance on faith as another component that helped him through his trial-filled year. In his youth, he felt others had used religion against him. His family was deeply connected to religion, as he discussed,

> My grandpa was a Baptist preacher, and he ran the church, and all the family went to that church. It was a family church. I just always was so devastated because I had that missing part of me where I just felt like I would never have religion. I thought I would never be baptized. I thought maybe if I lied and said being gay was wrong that they would still do it as long as I wasn't with anybody. But I knew that was not going to be a choice for me. So, I never thought that religion was an option for me until I met the church, and I'm in the Christian church. But the Episcopal Church says, "It's not that we don't tolerate it. We don't think it's wrong." There's a big difference.

The Episcopal church also shaped TM's perception of the community. As the church worked out its position on same-sex marriage, it also affirmed his view that he, as a gay man, could never be safe in the true beliefs of members the communities where he lived and worked.

> I don't trust people because you can't tell; you really cannot tell. You think you know. For example, a woman in my church, who hugged and loved me since the first day I was there. I thought she was one of the biggest allies, and when it came down to it, she was the first one that spoke out against gay marriage. I was floored, and she left the church because of it. So, her argument was, she said, "So, we're not a biblical church anymore."

Regardless, the Episcopal Church helped TM through his difficult times. He stated, "My church is a great source of strength. They're very affirming, and they have been for years. They have marriage equality ironed out, and for the most part, it's a very liberal church." They were active members in the church, and his partner was on the deacon board. TM recalled, "After he passed away, they just enveloped me during that time," he stated. Despite being together for 30 years, TM and his partner were unable to marry. His partner died in February 2015, 4 months before gay marriage became legal.

TM identified the communities surrounding work and home as very conservative, reiterating his decision to separate his work and personal lives. His advice to others was not to be a part of the community where they work. Even so, TM was out in the county where he resides. He stated, "There I'm totally out. I don't take part in gay pride marches. We go to art exhibitions and picnics. . . . We volunteer together." One strategy that allowed him to thrive in conservative work and public spaces was his ability to listen to others' conversations, particularly political ones. TM said, "I listen for politics all the time because people that are big Republicans are most of the time antigay." He clarified, "Most of the time, [but] not always."

There were several faculty members in whom TM confided during difficult times. One of the math teachers was his best friend. Along with the counselor and a couple of other teachers, TM had a small network of close relationships with whom he was completely out. He remarked again that sometimes he misreads people and finds that they are not the true allies he imagined them. He shared one such instance of a faculty member.

> I thought she was an open and outright ally. I found out she's not, even though she didn't know she was telling me that. She and I were talking, and she told me about her son, and she said, I've been wondering if he's gay." Then she said, just off the cuff, kind of carefully said, "Which is OK if he is, but he just wasn't brought up that way." I'm like, "You just told me you're not an ally. You just told me that you don't support gay people," and she didn't even know she said that, I'm sure. That was probably the closest thing to someone saying they disagree with it.

TM stated, "I just surround myself with supportive people. If they're not supportive, I don't have anything to do with them because it's just wasted energy. It'd be different if we can change people's minds, but I've found you can't." TM remarked, "The only thing you can do is

live the best life you can and hope that somebody changes their mind on their own by seeing that you're a pretty decent person."

At this point in the conversation, TM referred to his husband. After the death of his partner, he began dating, entered a new relationship, and eventually married. He described his husband as a very conservative Republican. TM laughed, admitting, "I didn't know that gay Republicans existed 'til I moved down here."

TM's husband became ill during their engagement, and he confessed that a major factor in the decision to get married was the ability to use sick leave. When his husband was diagnosed with stomach cancer, TM was again in a position of having to rely on administration and faculty for help. TM felt forced to come out to a newly hired coworker before he would have preferred. He advised the new faculty member of his husband's illness and let her know that he would have to be gone periodically. He felt that someone directly influenced by his absence deserved to know. He added, "She seems, in fact, very supportive."

When TM told the principal that his husband had cancer, she urged him to take all the time he needed. Although TM had never had a very open conversation regarding his sexual orientation or heard her views on same-sex marriage, he felt supported. TM voiced his concern that the principal would soon retire and leave him with an uncertain future. He explained,

> It happened with the assistant principal for instruction. It really worried me when she retired because you never know when somebody's coming in. I'm really worried because I know where she [the principal] is in that she's supportive, and I know the assistant principal; she is supportive. I'm worried about retirements.

TM felt less of a connection with the local board of education office. He based his perception of the elected board members on his view of the community as conservative and not

supportive of LGBTQ individuals or issues. According to TM, the conservative nature of the community extends to the local board and limits his job security.

TM shared his experience teaching the superintendent's and assistant superintendent's children. He found these administrators to be extremely supportive and was thankful that their children grew tremendously while in his class. When he interacted with them at parent-teacher conferences, both men seemed very appreciative, and they were supportive every time anything came up. The director of the technology department, who worked closely with the superintendent, had his daughter moved into TM's class the following year. TM noted that he might have read more into it, but credited the experience of the top administrators' children for the technology director's decision.

When the discussion turned to students, TM was emphatic about not coming out to them. TM has invested much time and resource into his effort to keep his school and private lives separate, as evidenced by his maintenance of a geographic barrier. He noted there is a difference between students assuming and knowing his sexual orientation. TM compared his view of sharing sexual orientation with students to an Aesop's fable.

> I don't tell them anything, nothing. There's an Aesop's fable that I teach every year. It's about an eagle that is shot down in midflight, and as he's dying, he looks, and the arrow has his own feathers in it. He had dropped off some feathers, and the hunter had used his own feathers against him. I feel like the more you give people, the more ammunition they have or can use against you. I don't think that, for me, I would share that with kids and parents; it's just a different thing. You know, one day, some people may be able to do that.

According to TM, “It absolutely says in our code of conduct we’re not to share our sexual orientation with students.” TM assumed that was only for “gay people”; he could not imagine a school telling straight people not to share that they were heterosexual. The hard part for TM was hearing all of his coworkers discussing their families. He stated, “They’ll have a picture—’Here’s my husband, here’s my two kids, my dogs,’ and all that stuff. You know I’m left out of that, but it’s worth it not to have the issues.”

When I asked TM how giving up the ability to share his life made him feel, he responded, “Like a second-class citizen.” He added, “There’s a part of me that says you know you don’t get to have this, but now I get to be married. . . . I never thought in my lifetime I would ever see that.”

TM felt that he had to be very guarded with students. He compared speaking of his personal life to using profanity at school. Although he could use profanity at home, he had to monitor his language at work. He further claimed to be bound by his integrity, noting that he would not lie to students. He explained,

> I feel like you have to be guarded. I have students that have come up to me. The last several students said, “I see you’ve been out [of school]. Is everything okay?” You know, I have a strong sense of integrity. I’m not going to lie to them. I say, “Yes, I have a sick, very sick close family member.” I have just tried to learn to do things that are truthful but not to divulge.

TM found his students a source of insecurity. He shared an instance in which a student obtained a picture from Facebook of his late partner and him. The student downloaded the picture of the then-18-year-old couple covered by a rainbow filter and was passing it around in class. That instance made TM fearful, but he acted like it was not a big deal.

Despite misgivings regarding students, TM wore an engagement ring on his right hand before his marriage. When students would ask about the ring, he would respond, “It’s just a ring.” TM observed that the students have not asked about the ring after his marriage and its placement on his left hand. His plan if students do ask him is to continue to refer to the ring as “just a ring.”

TM felt there were probably parents, a lot of them, who did not want their kids in his class because they perceived him to be gay. He stated, “It is so funny because I don’t teach gayness; I teach English, writing, and reading.” TM felt that administrators were removing students whose parents did not want their children in his class. As he taught an honors class, he was unsure if students requested another class due to the rigor and the workload or because they learned he was gay. TM explained,

> It was primarily boys. The boys don’t want to be in there because you’re gay, and their parents don’t want a gay influence, or whatever. And honestly, I don’t have time for that foolishness. At first, I was wondering about it and then I was like, “I’m not putting any more energy into it.” It reduces my workload, and if that was going to be an issue, that has solved a lot of problems.

Our final interview focused on TM’s perception of avenues for improving the school climate for LBGTQ educators and students within the district. Before discussing possible improvements regarding LGBTQ educators, TM reiterated the importance of the legalization of gay marriage. “That forced school systems to have same-sex benefits because we’re legally married. So that helped a lot and held some people’s feet to the fire where they had to do it and see the world hasn’t come crashing down,” he explained.

TM also found the use of inclusive language helped and noted the secretary's invitation to the faculty Christmas party. He found her use of the phrase "significant other" as inclusive. He stated, "That felt like a safe word. I thought it was sensitively chosen. So inclusive language would be good."

TM continued, "If administrators would make an effort to put out there that it was a safe environment, that would go a long way." Without such a statement, the burden is on him to determine where the safe zones were. TM noted the counselor's placement of a sign identifying her office to be a "gay-friendly zone."

> I think just a very direct statement that we're inclusive here; this includes straight people, gay people, bisexual people. You know, this is a nondiscriminatory workplace. When we do weddings, we are going to do everybody's wedding; when we're going to do flowers for somebody, we're going to do everybody's flowers.

TM believed that a statement from the superintendent "would be best from the top down," and if "it was also sincere," that would be the best show of support. He stated, "It would be great to see, to hear it, even if they're legally required to do it, but it would be even better if it were sincere."

TM was less optimistic regarding professional development. He felt that any professional development activities addressing sexual orientation or gender identity would probably go over like a "lead balloon." He said, "I think it would cause more negative situations than it would positive." He added that the faculty could resent the attempt and "bitch and moan about it." TM explained what he thought would be the best vehicle for change.

> I think the kids are the answer. I think the kids are changing like I've never seen before. Last year was the first year that I have ever had a kid, not to me, but I hear them openly

> talking about their sexual orientation in class to their classmates. Just very casually, just like anything else. Last year was the first year I ever have seen that before, and it's much more acceptable now. There are some gay students in my classes that have friends that would kill for them. So, it's moving in the direction with the students. I just don't know about the adults, and maybe it's just a matter of waiting. I think the culture is changing its mindset. I think it's been so gradual with the student population that the students have become acclimated to it. They see it much more, and it's not a big deal to them anymore, and they're much more accepting.

TM believed that a GSA would be beneficial but wondered if the timing was right. He stated, "I think that'd be a great thing, eventually. Right now, it would be much more detrimental than it would be helpful. But eventually, if you could move into that direction." TM had participated in a GSA during his undergraduate studies. In his experience at the college level, he found the organization could become a dating place. However, he confessed, "I guess it would be OK, too, because [students] need a relationship, but at the same time with being in education. I don't know. It's very tricky."

The year before our interview, two female students had approached TM regarding the procedure for starting a GSA. "They came to me, and they said, 'We feel like you're a safe person,'" and TM responded, "'Thank you, and I am. I'm a very safe person; nothing that you say will leave me.'" He took the girls' request to the counselor and the principal. "We were very supportive, but we just told them, OK, do some research," TM stated. The principal and TM advised the girls to plan a purpose for the club and establish how they would handle membership. He and the counselor found that the students did not really want to do any work. He

was further troubled by the fact that neither student was out to her parents and concerned that a GSA could have led to a confrontation.

I asked him how he felt about mentoring LGBTQ students, to which he responded smugly, "Not if I like to get my house payment and stuff made." TM stated that he was not trying to change the world at this point in his career. He explained,

> Even in my community, where I was in a community theater play, and there was a girl that was 16. She said, "I know you're gay. You and SR are gay, a gay couple, and I think I'm gay." I'm just not in a position where I can do that. "I'll do what I can," I said, and I was able to gently support her and everything, but she wasn't out to her mother. She was saying she was still questioning, and I could see them all blaming me for promoting, you know, turning her or whatever. If I were an accountant, it would be different, but I'm in education.

TM has had to overcome many difficulties in his life regarding his sexual orientation. However, due to his forced outing, he established many supportive relationships. He admittedly found himself drawn to habit and often led by the tormenting events of his past, which brought about his skepticism of coworkers and community members. He felt that, at 52, he was too old to change much and noted that his keen intuition, skepticism, work ethic, and separation between work and family helped him be a successful LGBTQ educator over the last 26 years.

AJ

I met AJ years ago through his stepfather and had some knowledge of his LGBTQ status from talks with my children. Our first interview took place in November 2019. At his suggestion, we met at his school for the interviews. He was the last and the youngest participant I

interviewed. It was difficult to schedule AJ's interviews considering his college schedule and his sponsorship of an after-school club. However, I was grateful that he shared his story with me.

A single mother raised AJ and his older brother outside the limits of a small, one-traffic-light town within the county. He realized at an early age that he was different from other students, and this became more evident when he moved from the public school system to a private Christian academy at the start of his sixth-grade year. He found that he was not interested in girls; despite trying to have a girlfriend several times, he realized that he could relate to them more as friends. During this time, he shared his feelings with only his mother. He explained, "Obviously, I didn't say anything about it to anyone other than my mom. My mom knew and she supported me, but we didn't talk to anybody about it; that was our little secret, I guess."

He shared the beginning of his trials growing up gay in rural Southeast Georgia. AJ confessed that he loved basketball but that he was not any good, lacking skill and ability. Still wanting to be a part of the game, AJ decided to become a cheerleader. AJ explained that his mother knew that there would be barriers to face. Regardless of the possible obstacles and in support of AJ's aspirations, she enrolled him in Southern Pride, where he received instruction in gymnastics and competitive cheerleading.

At the end of his eighth-grade year, the same year he realized he was gay, AJ told the coach at the Christian academy that he wanted to cheer when he entered ninth grade. The coach denied his request. AJ recalled the support received from his mother, stating, "Mama said, 'Well, as long as I'm paying tuition here, [my son] can do what he wants to do.' So, come ninth grade, I started to cheer, and it was a big uproar." He admitted that cheering was an ongoing struggle with the coach and some of the parents. He explained,

> They were very upset [the school] allowed a guy to cheer. But they watched college football teams that have guy cheerleaders. So, that was a little bit of an uphill battle and not great. I even had parents say a few things not directly to me, but through their children about [me] being a faggot, and "Why are we allowing a queer to be at a Christian school" or whatever? But we just faced it in stride. Man, if ever needed or anything ever needed to be addressed, my mom addressed it. But about 11th grade, [the uproar] kind of just died off.

He never dated in high school, and everyone just knew he was different and assumed he was gay. For a long time, AJ was sensitive regarding his status as a gay man. He stated, "I didn't let things bother me, but about my sexuality from probably about 16 to 20, I was very sensitive." He thanked God for overcoming his sensitivity because he started teaching when he was 22, which necessitated callousness.

When AJ started college, he soon cut ties with friends from the Christian academy. "I felt like it was all fake because I know they didn't care that I was gay. And, I mean, if you don't have friends that support you and that you can talk to, it's difficult." He found refuge in college life, where "most people in college are very open-minded about things." The connections AJ made in college helped him choose the path to becoming a teacher. He shared his experience.

> I found my own group of friends, even in the education department. I had a couple of gay professors that I could speak with and talk with about different things, and that helped out a lot, especially when I realized I wanted to be a teacher. I really had to think about [how] it's going to be hard being gay and being a teacher, especially in South Georgia. I faced that battle. Is this something that I really want to do? Do I want to have children say things to me? Do I want to have other teachers say things or administrators? You know,

not be hired because of that. Not because of how good I am or how much schooling that I have, but just because I'm gay. Am I not gonna be hired? That was a big battle to face, but I just said, it is what it is, and if I have to pack up and move to Los Angeles where half of everybody's gay, I'll get a job out there. That's where I was at.

AJ did the next best thing. Rather than move across the country to get a job teaching, he moved to Savannah, Georgia. "I guess that's why I jumped out to Savannah because I knew there wouldn't be a problem getting a job there." AJ said his time in Savannah "was an overall good experience." AJ admitted having been a little bit scared to apply for employment at the identified Southeast Georgia School district because had not attended public schools, and he felt that it would be difficult.

After his experience in Savannah, AJ moved back home and worked in a neighboring county. He noted that his relationship with the school's principal was quite good, saying, "She was a very wonderful support." Through his conversations with the principal, he found out that her daughter was gay. He recalled,

> We were having a conversation one day, and her child came up. Her child had just started college, and she said, "I don't know if you know this, but . . ." This was probably two months into school. She said, "I don't know if you know this. But, you know, my daughter is gay," and I said, No, I didn't know that." She said, "Yeah, she actually has a girlfriend, and they have been dating." And so then I knew, just how she was talking with me, how her demeanor was. I knew that then I could say, "Well, I don't know if you know, but I am [gay]." "Well, I assumed," she said, "but that doesn't bother me." She said, "When I hired you, I knew you were good." She said, "And I knew that would not affect your performance at your job." She said, "It doesn't matter to me. I just want

someone here who's going to do their job and who speaks for the children." And she said, "That doesn't affect how you do your job."

AJ had observed people before coming out to them, and the principal who confided in him allowed him to feel comfortable disclosing to her. He decided to leave the system after the principal's promotion to the board office. "The person coming up, I just, I didn't think we were going to get along very well. So, I decided to hop and skip over here," AJ stated.

Just like AJ felt out the principal with whom he established a positive relationship, he also tried to get a feel for her replacement. He had already started looking for a new job because "you hear things through the grapevine." The new administrator had previously attended meetings and came across a bit racist. AJ explained,

> To me, if you're racist, you're going to be homophobic, and you're probably even it's sometimes going to be sexist. Not always true, but that's how I feel about it. I don't want to be under someone who's like that, because I feel that maybe I would even be targeted that way, and I'm not the one to whimper down and take things. I'm going to give it back. I don't care if you're my just my colleague or you are above me, I'm going to tell you like it is, respectfully.

AJ reflected on his experience working with women and men, noting that he had never worked for a male boss. AJ found that he had always functioned best under women, which was by design. "I've always been able to make friends with women better than I had men," he stated. Even his part-time job during college was under a woman. "I've just always worked better under women," he explained. Making connections with women was easy for AJ, who found them to be more accepting. He figured it must have something to do with women being motherly and

nurturing. AJ was quick to add that he did not mean that men were incapable of nurturing; however, he felt women were innately so.

At his current school within the district of study, the principal was a woman with a child who is gay. According to AJ, it took about a year to develop a relationship with her. He admitted that he does not know the situation between his principal and her gay child. Also, he has not an open conversation with her as with his previous principal regarding issues of gender identity or sexual orientation. However, he stated, "After a year, I felt like I feel like that our relationship has just gotten better as I've stayed longer. We've gotten closer. We work really well together." AJ perceived his current administration as supportive as he recalled an administrator who had since left.

> When she was here, she was very supportive, and I mean, she was tough. Don't get me wrong, she was tough, and she and I would argue a lot, but it wasn't ever about anything to do with my sexuality. I do not feel that she held that against me. That didn't matter as long as I was doing my job.

AJ felt his administrators provided him with opportunities for advancement by allowing him to be a teacher leader. AJ explained the support.

> I feel like we have a great group of leaders here, and it makes me feel good that they call on me to be a mentor for other teachers. They call me to help other teachers when they're struggling with different things. They call me to go to a conference, to come back and redeliver. They call on me to lead a professional development; that makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I'm needed here, and that's a big deal to me. Especially being gay because you don't know; sometimes you worry about that. I go above and beyond on my

job. But does anyone really see that? I feel like, for the most part, at our school, it's noticed, and they really make me feel secure at my job.

When AJ started his current job, he thought one male administrator may have had some homophobic feelings. However, during his time in the district and school, he and the male administrator developed a relationship. AJ stated,

> I'll be honest. At first, I really felt like maybe he was [homophobic]. Now [I know] that was just a perception. He never once showed any type of homophobia ever once toward me. But that was my perception. And again, he may disagree with it. But after getting to know him over the last 3 years, we get along, and we can talk now. We don't talk about that, but we have a very good dialogue professionally. Other than that, no, I haven't experienced any type of homophobia.

AJ has never felt unsafe in the school environment. Much of his confidence regarding his feelings of safety, security, and support at school comes from his belief in the administration, namely the principal.

> I feel like she knows that I do my job. She knows I'm putting 110%, and she would back me up, and she would definitely let that parent know that, "Hey, he's a good teacher, and his sexuality doesn't matter, and that's not going to get in the way of his job performance in your child's class." Of course, I know and you know, as well, you kind of have to sometimes give in to the parents because it is what it is. But I felt like she would support me and she would not just let it happen. She would not back down. She would definitely put her two cents in and let them know that shouldn't matter. You know, [my] sexuality or or any of that should not matter.

AJ had a divided view of the support received from faculty members at his school. He observed that the faculty was split down the middle regarding their support or opposition to LGBTQ issues. He stated, "I feel like we have several staff members here who are open-minded. . . . 'Do what you do, as long as it doesn't affect me.'" AJ added, "I think you have some of the staff members who are completely against [LGBTQ issues]; they look down on it." Conversely, he noted that people were becoming more moderate in their views regarding LGBTQ individuals than in previous decades.

AJ teaches in a school set up to function as three independent schools divided by grade levels. Therefore, his experiences are largely confined to those with whom he works directly. He explained, "I don't know if I could say the same about the other hallways, just one. We're such a big school. We don't directly work with them very often." In general, he felt the least connected with White men; they definitely made him feel less and secure about his job. AJ was especially skeptical of those with deep-rooted White Southern values. Having been raised and now living in the same small rural area, he voiced concern that his fellow Southerners see him as different. "I have the Southern roots there," he said. "But just because of my sexuality, it's like I've been bred in a different field or something."

AJ has found faculty members within the school who support him, particularly those with whom he works the most directly. AJ mentioned that he had in-depth conversations with a fellow teacher in his instruction group and is completely out to her. "I know people know, but again, that's not something that I tell people unless we have a relationship like [her] and me," he stated. AJ claimed that he did not have a relationship like that with anyone else at the school.

AJ has known Judge, a teacher in his instruction group, since they were both children. However, they had never had many conversations regarding AJ's sexuality. Even so, AJ was confident that Judge was supportive, as he explained,

> Judge and I have known each other for a very long time, so he knows. We don't really have a conversation often, but we have. But he knows, and he's—Judge is Judge. He loves everybody, no matter what. That's what's so good about Judge: He's the picture of a Christian because he just loves everybody, no matter what.

AJ has shared his status with other teachers with whom he has established a relationship. He had admitted earlier that he gauged people before coming out or acknowledging his sexual orientation. AJ built a relationship with a teacher he has mentored for several years. He disclosed how he came out to the teacher.

> He and I have built somewhat of a relationship, and we've actually hung out outside of school. We've had a conversation; he knows. I mean, he actually asked me. We decided . . . he wanted to go somewhere to some restaurant. He said, "You've got to try it." So, I went with him once with some friends. Afterward, he said, "I just want to ask you. Are you gay?" And I was like, "Yeah." He said, "Well, I assumed." Most people say "I assumed," but really, other than him, I haven't told anyone else.

Another teacher on AJ's hallway has a son who is gay, and he has observed how she speaks regarding her child. He acknowledged that he does not have an open relationship with her. AJ explained his decision not to confide in her.

> She has a son that's gay, and she talks down about him. So, I have never opened up to her about that. I know she knows, but she also knows that I am pretty outspoken about different things, and she's had to see that side of me a few times. I think she might be

> afraid to say anything negative. Not that I'm mean, but I will tell people if there's something that I feel is wrong or that needs to be said. I'm going to say it because it needs to be said—[I'm never unprofessional and never rude—but she and I do not have that type of relationship.

AJ has not experienced homophobic harassment within the school system; however, he has experienced homophobia. Faculty members have given him dirty looks or whispered as he walked past. AJ disclosed, "I have been told a few things—gossip, I guess—of a few people saying various things, staff members making comments, but it's never been a confrontation. They've never directly said anything to me." AJ does not consider such behavior harassment but a nuisance he has to tolerate. He confessed to developing a "thick skin" over the years, as reflected in the following quote.

> Sometimes I've tried to play it off as someone's having a bad day. You see someone whispering when you walk in, and you think, "I'm just overthinking that," but when it happens to be the same people over and over, you kind of get a feeling that those people do not like you. My only assumption can be because these people do not know me other than here, it would have to be my sexuality, which is unfortunate.

Regardless of AJ's resilience, he was emphatic about how he would respond to verbal harassment from a faculty member or any other adult. "That would be the day I would lose my job, if an adult came to me and approached me, someone that I worked with, and was ugly about it," he stated. AJ admitted that he "never has anyone crossed that line."

AJ is not out to students, despite any assumptions the students may make regarding his sexuality. He made clear that talking about his sexual orientation with students was a line he would not cross. He expanded on his decision.

> You have to be careful. Let me stop there and say this: I did not tell my children, my students, that I'm gay. I never [have] and I will never. Even when I've had students approach me regarding [that] they are gay, or they think they are, or they think they're bisexual, or they think they're transgender. They normally do. Those are the ones that approached me; they want to talk to me about it. But I even then do not tell them that I am, because I feel like they're at a young age and that's crossing the line.

To keep his sexual orientation out of conversations with students, AJ is always guarded. For example, students often ask him if he is married. When students ask questions regarding his family and aspirations to get married and have children, he often deflects or minimizes the inquiries. He reported, "I do have to be careful. The kids always asked me, 'Hey, are you married? You don't want to get married? You don't want to have kids?'" He always answers, no. He findings that students are just naturally inquisitive: "They want to know about us. They love knowing everything about us." AJ added that in all other matters, he was completely honest with students, but regarding his sexuality, "I know that that I would not be able to cross that line with the kids, or I feel like I would not be able to."

AJ shared an experience in which he had to confer with a student who had overheard another student call AJ gay. Again, he confronted the situation without acknowledging to the student that the comment was correct. Instead, he focused on the distress it caused this student and the nature in which the comment was made. AJ related,

> He said, "I'm kind of bothered by something." He really seemed distressed and I thought, "Oh someone's bullying him or someone said something." He said, "Well, someone in PE called you gay." I said, "He called you gay?" He said, "No, called *you* gay." I'm like, "Okay." And he's like, "Well, that really made me mad." I said, "Don't let that make you

mad." I said, "I'm glad that you care enough about me, but do not worry about what other people say about me. Especially me," I said. "I'm a big boy. I don't care what anyone says." I said, "Just let it roll off your back." He said, "Well, I wanted to say something, but—" I said, "No. You don't say anything to people like that." I said, "It's just ignorance is what it is."

AJ noted that the most important thing he wanted to impart to students was the idea that "we are all human. We all might look different, do different things, love different people, have different skin color, but we're also humans, and I just want them to love one another," he explained.

AJ reported feeling safe, interacting with parents in the school environment. However, when asked to convey his sense of job security related to students' parents, he was less assured. He relayed his skepticism and the strategies he used to combat parents' negative perceptions.

> I do feel like if I am not on my P's and Q's, and they can find something to point out, that they would do it. And I don't want to say that I'm a target. I don't want to sound like I'm a victim. I'm not a victim by any means. But again, I do feel like if I do not put in 110% that it will be noticed. I can't just put in 100%; I have to put in 110%, which is why I do after-school tutoring for free. Not that I'm bragging about it, just letting you know that's why I do stuff like that because I want my kids to succeed. But I want the community and these parents to know that I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure that your child succeeds.

When required to meet with parents, AJ's coworkers have observed he can be a bit intimidating. He enters meetings with his guard up, and in his experience, many parents seek to find other things to hold responsible for student behavior. He described his demeanor in a parent

meeting: “These days, the child didn’t do anything wrong. Their child is perfect. We’re wrong,” AJ reflected. Therefore, he noted, “I go up with a little bit of a wall, but I am always kind, and I am a little bit assertive.” He said he would make eye contact with the parent and expect the parent to make eye contact in return. AJ explained that his behavior in the meeting was also a means of coping.

> I don’t want them to think, because I’m gay, that they’re going to run over me because I do, again, build up that little bit of a wall. And I want [the parents] to know that I’m serious, and I’m not backing down. I mean, that’s just how I am. Because I think a lot of people assume that gay men are sensitive, and you’re just feminine, and that’s not true. Not always. And that’s my coping strategy, just to be a little bit assertive. And I think maybe that could be where the tension’s a little bit thick because I do go in, and I’m straightforward. I’m nice to them, and I smile, but I’m just gonna go and get to the point. I’m not beating around the bush.

AJ also described his experience with homophobia as an LGBTQ educator outside of the school environment. Within the small, rural community in the county where he was raised, he had not encountered any issues regarding his sexual orientation. He said, “I grew up there. I don’t feel like I’ve ever faced any issues because everyone knows either my mom or my grandmother.”

However, when he reflected on the county as a whole, his experience was markedly different. AJ reported being the recipient of homophobic insults by teenage boys hanging out in the Walmart parking lot. He revealed, “It’s been several months, but one of those young boys will see me, and they’ll yell ‘faggot,’ ‘queer.’” However, AJ does not let the insults bother him.

He confessed, “I’m assuming people think that that offends me, but it doesn’t. But I get some of that even to this day.” He discussed his frustration with verbal insults.

> Outside of the church, I have a few friends here at school. It can be rough around here, but I have thick skin, and it doesn’t bother me; it doesn’t affect me. I’m like, “OK, well, if that’s all you can say to me, that I’m a fag from around the corner here, you’re pathetic. I mean, really, if that’s all you can come up with yet or you don’t have anything better to do with your time, that is pretty pathetic.” But those are just a few of the small issues; I’ve never had any physical—knock on wood—any physical assaults. I’ve never had anyone mess with my property or anything like that—just kind of the verbal stuff. I mean, you do get a little bit of verbal abuse or some of the nonverbal, the looks, but it is what it is.

AJ was raised in the Church of God but left when a preacher told him that LGBTQ individuals would burn in Hell. He is now a Methodist. He explained, “I said, ‘Well, OK, so that’s how you feel. And they demand somewhere that [God] accepts sinners because obviously everyone in this church is saints, so I’m going to go find where they have sinners.’” AJ is not out at his Methodist church; however, he thinks many within the congregation are aware of his sexual orientation. Due to the conservative nature of the community and his affiliation with the church, AJ is not married, does not date, and does not talk about his sexual orientation at church. He stated,

> When I go to church, that’s a relationship between me and God, not me and anybody in that church. And so I have my church family, and they love me for who I am. I’m sure they are some of the older people who disagree with who I am, but they still love me, and that’s what I want.

AJ has seriously contemplated moving to the Atlanta area, where people would accept his LGBTQ status, and he would feel more secure. He said, "I feel like if I were in some other place, even Savannah, Atlanta, or Macon, the bigger towns, I would feel more secure in my job." AJ felt that in the broader area, he would undoubtedly be able to go out and date people. Also, he would feel comfortable having and socializing with friends who are gay. "I know that sounds so silly saying that out loud because I think it in my head all the time," he admitted. He went so far as to sign a contract with a school system for the 2018–2019 school year. However, he had to break the contract when his grandmother became ill, and he decided to stay in Southeast Georgia to care for her. At the time of the interview, AJ not only did not date, but he did not interact within the local LGBTQ community. He feared retaliation from community members, parents, and students who could see him out on a date or interacting with other LGBTQ individuals. He explained,

> I do avoid having gay friends, avoid dating. I haven't dated in over four years because I don't want that to affect my job. I do not want to lose my job because of that, and around here, I feel like I could; it's possible that I could lose my job. Because legally, I'm not protected in the state of Georgia. Under that and public county, I'm not. And so, they could fire me in the end. They don't have to say why. So, I am hesitant about anything in the LGBT community. I stay away from it. And that's unfortunate because it's hard. It's very difficult because people my age, now 28, you know they're getting married, they are starting to have their first children or the first child you know, maybe the second child. It is hard. And it's very difficult doing it on your own, but it is what it is.

Looking ahead to possible improvements for LGBTQ educators, AJ felt that communication was the key to understanding. According to AJ, the public school system needs to understand how to communicate with LGBTQ educators and students. He suggested,

> Educate people on LGBTQ issues. Open up that line of communication with your faculty members. . . . I don't know, just being more open-minded, being more accepting and not so judgmental. And again, I'm not saying that directly about the administration here, but it's the people who are higher up and the community members and the other stakeholders, and that's what concerns me the most. I think that would start with the community, the board, and the LGBTQ community working together to open up that line of communication, saying, "We don't have to agree, but we're still going to accept you for who you are because we're a loving community."

AJ noted that any positive change for LGBTQ educators in rural Southeast Georgia must come from the top. He felt that the superintendent and the local board of education needed to extend a message of understanding and acceptance. "We need to know that it's OK that if I see you and your boyfriend or your girlfriend or your spouse out, I'm not going to judge you. Do your job; you're a great asset to our community," AJ remarked.

AJ also noted that an expansion of the Safe Space program would be beneficial for LGBTQ students. "I would love to have that program here," he said. He would also enjoy leading the program, but it would have to be approved by the board. He added that the Atlanta school where he had signed a contract had the Safe Space program at the middle-school level and GSA at the high school. AJ was confident that students and faculty would benefit from the training, saying, "Those two programs, in my opinion, are great. And they will be great assets to any district to help the students and even the faculty members."

AJ's interviews showed his self-sacrifice and dedication to the field of education. He is unapologetic and secure in his choice to become a teacher. His decision to teach in rural Southeast Georgia has required him to give up any aspirations for a relationship and demanded him go above and beyond others' expectations. AJ reflected emotionally on this decision.

> I wish that I could have a normal life, as in a normal personal life. I mean, I can, but I can't go out with people. I can, but it's going to be frowned upon. I would not feel comfortable going out with someone here in the county because of my position as a teacher. For instance, going on a date. I wish that was different. Again, it's not like I'm not allowed to, but it would really be frowned upon if I did, [if] someone heard about it or someone saw me or whatever. Because of the area we live in, and because of my title as a teacher, I feel like sometimes we're held to a higher standard than everyone else.

Chapter V

COLLECTIVE PORTRAIT

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the process used to analyze data in this study. I discuss the coding process to identify themes common across participants. Each theme receives a discussion using the interview data to support the findings. The findings connect to the literature throughout each theme. In this study, I explored the experiences of identified veteran LGBTQ faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district. I wanted to understand if they feared harassment or termination if their LGBTQ status became known and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the life and career experiences of identified LGBTQ veteran educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district?

RQ2: Do identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known?

RQ3: If identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination, what strategies have they used to manage their careers?

Data Analysis

The data collection process spanned the summer and fall of 2019. Data analysis extended into January and February 2020. I collected interview data from five participants recruited using purposeful sampling within an identified rural school district in Southeast Georgia. Interviews followed Seidman's (2013) three-step interview process. The first interview concentrated on

acquiring the participants' detailed accounts of their life, family background, education, and outness as an LGBTQ-identifying individual and any positive or negative experiences linked to their sexual orientation. The second and third interviews focused on their experiences, reflections, and strategies to navigate careers at an identified rural Southeast Georgia school district as LGBTQ educators.

Due to the study's sensitive nature, I requested each participant to take part in the interviews in person. During the initial face-to-face meeting, I obtained permission via informed consent and established an open line of communication. To protect their identities, the participants received a pseudonym. Of the seven individuals initially identified, six agreed to participate in the study, and five met the criteria of being LGBTQ educators with over five years in education and self-reported TKES evaluations of Level III or above. Table 2 shows the demographic information of the five participants.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Years in education	LGBTQ status	Degree
RA	15	Married bisexual	Specialist
HM	12	Married lesbian	Specialist
EJ	26	Single gay male	Specialist
TM	28	Married gay male	Doctorate
AJ	6	Single gay male	Specialist

Interviews took place at locations chosen by the participants. In some instances, participants opted to meet in their classrooms after school hours, and others decided to meet at their homes. Participants were able to review transcripts to ensure accuracy and clarify experiences. All interviews underwent digital recording and transcription. According to Merriam (2009), using several data collection sources can support the accuracy in interpretation by

comparing interview data, observation data, and participant reflection. I used three sources of data—interviews, participant notes, and researcher memos—to achieve triangulation, thus increasing the study's credibility.

After the first round of interviews, I began the data analysis process, starting with breaking down large amounts of text. I used MAXQDA software to read through data and group data into codes. During the first round of coding or initial coding, I used structural coding, which provided a means to label and index data from a larger data group (Saldaña, 2016). As I read through the data, I added more specific categories and subcodes. I also used in vivo coding, analyzing the participants' actual words. Table 3 presents a list of initial codes.

Table 3

Initial Codes

Code	Code description	Participant response
STR	Strategies used by LGBTQ educators to successfully navigate their careers	TM: I listen very intently to what other people say very quietly before I ever divulge anything; I've heard them say stuff. I felt them out as far as how they believe in certain things. I listened to what they say.
PI	Perceived improvements that could be made for LGBTQ educators	AJ: Learning how to communicate, how to be accepting, LGBT key faculty members, Add in the clause . . . if you ever look at the application clause, it says we do not discriminate against race, color, religion . . . federal applications, and in certain states, they include sexual orientation, but on ours, we do not; it's not required in Georgia.
H	Homophobic experiences	HM: It made me feel very ostracized. Like, made me feel weird. Because in my head, I thought to myself to the person who said it, I thought, "I think you kiss your husband on the school grounds." 'Cause it was like a kiss on the cheek or whatever. That's what I was thinking in my head. . . . That's the reason I left.
OUT	Experience coming out to others	RA: I think at some point before we got married, most of the coworkers knew that we were a couple, but it was still a very guarded thing.

Table 3 Continued

Code	Code description	Participant response
REL	Positive and negative experiences and the influence of religion on personal life and career	RA: The old, old-school Christian values and getting back to the basics and that kind of stuff, and it is really just a way to say, "I don't really support homosexual relationships."
COMM	Participants' perceptions of the community	EJ: I think even if they're a bunch of gay people at a restaurant here, I think you would have some confrontation. So, there'd be some remarks or whatever. And we realized that we're not dumb.
CLUB	Participants' perception or experience of LGBTQ clubs or organizations	TM: I could see that as a means to my own community, but then, I can see it as a big dating pool.
JS	Participants' perception of job security given their LGBTQ status	AJ: I feel like if I were in some other place, even Savannah, Atlanta, or Macon, the bigger towns, I would feel more secure in my job.
SF	Participants' feeling of safety within the community and school environment	AJ: I'm a big guy. I'm not a little person, and I'll be honest, I think that they'd be like, "Whoa, we don't need to mess with him." But I'm not big and scary. Just big. But . . . I feel pretty secure.
SUP	Support received from faculty, staff, administration, and local education agency	RA: My principal now, he's lovely. I'm nice, very accommodating, and I want to support accommodating you; it's very accepting and open. So, I'm good with that.
CURR	Participants provided views of LGBTQ issues in the curriculum	EJ: I'm not sure if that is part of the curriculum or not. And I'm sure there'd be some opposition to it, . . . if you were trying to teach children about that. I think that you'd run into some hurdles in the community.

During the reading and rereading of data, several commonalities began to emerge through pattern coding. The third and final phase of coding involved connecting the data establishing relationships between categories. I grouped data into related categories and created a qualitative codebook to organize the identified categories into potential themes.

Discussion of Themes

Qualitative inquiry is geared toward exploration and inductive inquiry. An understanding of exceptional cases is possible through a comparative analysis of open-ended observation or inquiry (Merriam, 2009). Through a step-by-step process of analyzing data via initial coding, constructing categories, and sorting categorical data, themes began to emerge. The themes arose through a review of the literature and constant comparative analysis of interview data, participant reflections, and personal reflections across categories and participants' experiences. The four major themes that emerged were (a) LGBTQ identity/fear of community, (b) LGBTQ identity/ school relationships, (c) teacher-student relationships/to be or not to be out, and (d) survival strategies and outlook to future.

LBGTQ Identity/Fear of Community

This theme characterized participants' experiences within the identified rural Southeast Georgia school district community, which is embedded in the Southern culture of the United States. Rudasill et al. (2018) noted that influences outside the school environment could affect school climate. Villani (1999) asserted that community members have the power to support change in the educational system by fostering an environment that vests everyone in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of all students. However, Swank et al. (2012) found that religious institutions and rural conservatism, in addition to higher levels of hate crime, subjected LGBTQ individuals to stress. Such conservatism can block or restrict the honest self-reflection needed for academic progress (Barton, 2012).

As suggested by Bone (2015), the community serviced by the Southeastern School District or exosystem, as well as the macrosystem of rural Southeast Georgia culture or the macrosystem influenced the school participating veteran LGBTQ educators' perception of school

climate within each microsystem or school despite the progress toward LGBTQ rights over the last decade or chronosystem. Participants did not find policies/practices that supported their identity due to pervasive heteronormativity and microaggressions.

In this case study, the Southern culture influenced the school climate experience for LGBTQ educators. Although participants reported that LGBTQ persons had become more accepted by parts of their community in the last decade, they continue to experience discrimination and harassment. Participants admitted to harassment, homophobia, and ostracism to some level from the community members and parents of students. The reports of harassment by participants at the Southeast Georgia school district supports Wright et al. (2019) assertion that ongoing negative consequences for LGBTQ teachers indicate a hostile school climate. Also, the combination of conservative culture and unequal protection creates a problematic environment for LGBTQ educators (Fetner et al., 2012; Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015).

AJ reported that more people know or are related to someone identifying as LGBTQ, as in the case of his principal's attitudes toward children in same-sex relationships. AJ's view confirmed Kosciw et al.'s (2016) assertion that greater social acceptance results from more people knowing someone who is LGBTQ. All participants admitted to having experienced homophobia or harassment regarding their sexual orientation before and during their employment with the Southeast Georgia school district. Also, participants acknowledged that their experiences as LGBTQ individuals and educators helped them establish the resiliency necessary to create successful careers as educators in rural South Georgia. For example, TM was a victim of homophobic harassment from an early age within a similar rural school system in the South. He lamented,

> It was a constant thing. Absolutely constant. Honestly, I don't know how they knew, but kids know. They're super intuitive because there were some kids that I feel like were a lot more effeminate than I was. I certainly was not coming on to anybody. So, I don't know how they knew, but they knew. And so, from the beginning, from kindergarten, people tried to pick on me, but luckily, I was always bigger, and I was able to fight it off. [One time], a group of boys . . . pinned me down, and they peed all over me. They said, "You like dick so much, here," and they peed all over me. I just had a lot of it, but what I did was, when that happened, I grabbed one of the boys, and I beat the crap out of him.

Similarly, AJ shared his experience of homophobia from his K-12 education as a student dealing with his sexual orientation and wanting to be a cheerleader in a private Christian school in rural Southeastern Georgia. His recollection indicated sameness within small towns and the strict gender roles and stereotypes established in conservative rural areas (Boso, 2016). AJ stated,

> I started cheer, and it was a big uproar with not only the coach but with some of the parents. They were very upset [the school] allowed a guy to cheer. But they watched college football teams that have guy cheerleaders. So, that was a little bit of an uphill battle and not great. I even had parents say a few things not directly to me, but through their children about [me] being a faggot, and "Why are we allowing a queer to be at a Christian school" or whatever? But we just faced it in stride. Man, if ever needed or anything ever needed to be addressed, my mom addressed it. But about 11th grade, [the uproar] kind of just died off. No one said anything about it; it was just kind of it is what it is. Everyone indirectly knew I didn't date anybody. They just knew that I was different. I cheered, and it was just assumed that I was gay.

Participants complained that it was difficult to come out to others and that a feeling of distrust began early. This made them question their acceptance across relationships with friends and family. HM captured the fear of coming out to friends or family at the age of 16:

> I couldn't tell my mom. . . . The next closest person to me was my best friend. So that I think that's why it was kind of rough; I didn't know if my family would accept me. I mean, I was just hoping my friends would, and she did; it was fine. I think that's what made it rough is because the person who I was closest to I couldn't tell them what was going on. And my mom was constantly, "What's wrong with you? You've lost weight. You're withdrawn," and I just couldn't come out and tell her.

In contrast, AJ's mother knew about his sexual orientation and supported him, but coming out to friends was not an option. AJ explained how his sexual orientation was a secret among his peers:

> I tried to have a girlfriend several times, and I realized I liked them as friends. I can relate to them more as a friend than I can in a relationship. Obviously, I didn't say anything about it to anyone other than my mom. My mom knew, and she supported me, but we didn't talk to anybody about it; that was our little secret, I guess.

Overall, participants felt that the community did nothing to provide the necessary support for LGBTQ educators instead of ignoring sexual and gender diversity. EJ remarked that culturally in Southeastern Georgia, homosexuality and LGBTQ issues are generally shrouded in secrecy. He explained,

> I think it's just not talked about here in the South. It's just not brought up. I know a couple of people that are [LGBTQ]. It's not talked about. Maybe [to] their immediate family or coworkers, it's known to them . . . and that's even true of my family. They know that I am, but it's not really talked about. They would defend me if anybody said

anything, obviously. But we just don't talk about it. I think that's just our culture, that even if you know somebody, it's not really talked about.

AJ, EJ, and HM found that the community at large informally functioned in a "don't ask, don't tell" manner. AJ stated, "I think it's almost like what they have in the military." HM also found conversations of LGBTQ issues often avoided.

> They just keep their thoughts to themselves. . . . I feel it is unspoken with certain people. . . . I do think that the [county] has become more open in the last ten years as a community, and I think that we can only be more open. I want to believe if you're not hurting anyone, why do you care? I do think that kind of stuff is said behind closed doors.

All participants reported experiencing some degree of homophobia within the community encompassing the rural Southeastern Georgia school district. AJ provided an example of homophobic harassment suffered at the hands of youth loitering in front of the local Walmart.

> I wait 'til eight, nine o'clock to go. I'll go buy groceries, and I've had instances—like I said, it's been several months—but one of those young boys will see me, and they'll say, "You're a faggot, queer," which, again, it doesn't bother me. I've been called a lot worse in my life. I'm assuming people think that that offends me, but it doesn't. But I get some of that even to this day.

Similarly, RA voiced her experience with homophobic harassment within her neighborhood.

> These were teenage boys out in the park, and [my wife] was outside, cleaning out the truck. She could just hear them yelling . . . at our house. There were people in the park that were yelling "faggot," "die," all that kind of stuff. So, I don't know if I necessarily felt unsafe, so much as our household or property might be unsafe, [but] in terms of just damaging stuff.

TM, EJ, and HM had not heard the overt homophobic language experienced by other participants. However, they provided their perceptions of the conservative culture and negative impressions of the community. EJ's experience was similar to AJ's without the use of explicitly homophobic language, as he explained,

> I think most people say little snide remarks. . . . I'm gay; I'm not deaf. I hear little things, but I'm a bigger person. I'm not gonna let some little sixth grader saying something to ruin my day or even a redneck at Walmart. Like I said, years ago, I probably would have bowed up and said something because I was immature, but now I'm more respectful of myself. I just try to be a good person, and eventually, they'll see that.

HM described her experience engaged in conversations where others assumed her to be a heterosexual:

> You hear it, whether it's through a group of people, and they don't necessarily know who you are, but then you hear them make comments about other people. You don't feel as able to be open about it. So, it's definitely you don't feel safe when you don't feel like there's anything that the community does in a way that promotes acceptance.

A community member accused HM of kissing her wife in the school parking lot. She described her fear of the power given to community members in similar situations:

> It wasn't true. But going back to whether my side will or will not be supported over somebody in the community. I just don't feel like if it was a straight couple that that would even happen.

Out to a certain degree, since he was 18, TM had experienced homophobia and homophobic harassment throughout his life. He explained that these negative experiences informed his view of the community surrounding the rural Southeast Georgia school district:

> The community is very conservative . . . and so if they're very conservative and against gay rights, I just don't have any contact with them. . . . [As] an example, the woman in my church, who hugged and loved me since the first day I was there. I thought she was one of the biggest allies, and when it came down to it, she was the first one that spoke out against gay marriage. I was floored, and she left the church because of it.

In general, participants also regarded Southern conservative religious institutions, their communities' exosystems, as unfriendly toward them. Barringer et al. (2013) found that men and women belonging to conservative denominations are less accepting of LGBTQ individuals. Southern men were most likely to hold negative views of LGBTQ persons. Barton (2012) suggested that such a rural conservative, antihomosexual culture can create what she called a "toxic closet" (p. 91), resulting in the inability to acknowledge one's sexual orientation in a positive light. Therefore, it was not unexpected that all participants reported being ostracized by Southern religious organizations at some point. For example, HM delineated her view of community members and school leadership:

> I feel like people who are on the board, in administration, or superintendents are a little bit more educated about [LGBTQ issues] than, for instance, your Joe Blow out there in the community who may have dropped out of high school or might just have a high school education. They just fall back on religion, and they're a lot scarier to me and my safety.

All participants noted that community opposition to same-sex marriage remained substantial and that strict conservative religious beliefs were a significant factor in the harassment and homophobia faced by LGBTQ educators in their school district. Given that three of the five participants were married to their partners during their tenure at the Southeast Georgia

school district, the fear of criticism from community members influenced their wedding arrangements. This was an example of the exosystem affecting the experiences of the LGBTQ educators within the district.

For instance, TM married his husband in a quiet ceremony at home, just the couple and their minister. Upon returning to school, TM only told those coworkers with whom he had the closest relationships. HM also settled for a small ceremony with only her wife and a witness. RA had a ceremony but worried about inviting coworkers and friends based on concern about leaked photos and condemnation from the community. RA described her fears:

> There were some individuals that we chose not to invite because we were afraid that they would almost make a spectacle of the wedding. . . . We were afraid that these people would go and perhaps take pictures and make it . . . a farce or something, like, "Hey, look at this. I'm at a lesbian wedding. Look, they're dancing together." Making fun of it or somehow putting a negative spin on it.

TM and RA both noted that the Episcopal Church was more friendly than evangelical churches. All participants experienced instances similar to TM that religion, to some degree, incorporated homophobic sentiments, especially rural Southern religious conservatism. Only one participant, HM, professed not to be aligned with any religious faith, stating, "I'm also agnostic. I'm not a Christian." The four other participants confessed that their Christian faith helped them endure the harassment and ostracism they encountered while also acknowledging the homophobic aspect of the area's Christian organizations. TM claimed, "Religion has always been used against me from the beginning." However, TM also expressed his reliance on his church as a source of strength:

> My church is a great source of strength for me. It's an Episcopal Church. They're very affirming, and they have been for years. They have marriage equality there that it's already been ironed out. For the most part, it's a very liberal church. And that was a huge source of strength for me when I went through all the death. My partner at that time . . . he was on the deacon board and everything so . . . they just kind of enveloped me during that time.

Similarly, EJ pointed to growing up in a rural Christian family and church. He provided the following perspective on Christianity in rural South Georgia:

> I was brought up in church, so it was really never an issue. But then, as I got older, I kind of got out of it. And I felt, I think we're at different points in our lives, growing up here: "If you're gay, you're going to burn in Hell," so then it's kind of hard to justify going to church all the time; that's in the back of your mind. I think you have to get past that.

AJ, like TM and EJ, was also raised in a conservative South Georgia Christian church. He, too, struggled to reconcile his love-hate identity as an LGBTQ Christian. He explained,

> I'm big into my church. I do go to church, but I'm a Methodist. I was Church of God, but I was told by a preacher that I would burn in Hell. So I said, "Well, OK, so that's how you feel. I need to find somewhere that accepts sinners because obviously everyone in this church is saints, so I'm going to go find where they have sinners."

RA and her wife sporadically attended a small Episcopal church and did not sense any kind of homophobia there or feel any attempt to ostracize them. She added that her relationship with her father became awkward and distant after he asked her to reflect on what the Bible said regarding homosexuality. Overall, the participants noted that the school system used religion to justify discrimination against LGBTQ people in school activities. RA emphasized, "It's a very

awkward situation because people do bring up the old-school Christian values, and getting back to the basics and that kind of stuff, and it is just a way to say, 'I don't really support homosexual relationships.'"

Another example of the use of religion included opening prayers at the district's convocations and system meetings. RA felt this was a public notice that the community and school system opposed same-sex relationships and, thus, LGBTQ educators. Participants condemned school officials' use of prayer to castigate LGBTQ people as villains. Braunstein, Fulton, and Wood (2014) asserted that interfaith prayer has the potential to bridge differences in diverse organizations. RA shared,

> I think that the only time it's awkward is instances where there are opening prayers or opening remarks. And it is a lot of Christianity-based stuff, even at our convocations or the beginning of the school year, [when] we have that whole county-wide meeting. It's always starting off with a prayer, and I'll go along with it, but then also, in the back of my mind, know that a lot of these people who are really appreciating this prayer [are] also people that probably would not support modern relationships.

HM reported "having the scripture up in the commons areas and all the schools. I think that that can promote an environment of noninclusiveness, regardless of LGBTQ, or whether it's somebody that may be Muslim, Jewish, or whatever." TM asserted that the conservative Christian influence from the community on the faculty, administration, and the LEA differs from his Episcopal church. His church affirms that not only do they tolerate same-sex relationships and marriage, but the congregants do not think homosexuality is wrong. All participants agreed that a more culturally inclusive tone regarding religion could be a positive step forward, as noted by Barringer et al. (2013). The sentiments from the veteran teachers in this sample echoed those

of beginning teachers in regard to the oppressive messages associated with religious beliefs (Tompkins et al., 2019).

LGBTQ Identity/School Relationships

This theme illustrated participants' efforts to develop professional relationships at work in the absence of school climate policies that explicitly protect LGBTQ teachers from discrimination due to their sexual identity, gender identity, or gender expression. I found that LGBTQ teachers were vulnerable in the absence of a clearly articulated mission statement celebrating diversity, acceptance, or even tolerance. Without protective policies at the macrosystem-level, LGBTQ educators had no recourse in the face of harassment. Instead, participants went to great lengths to establish collegial and constructive relationships with all school stakeholders. This was a strength and part of building resiliency expressed across participant interviews. Participants tried to foster supportive relationships or mesosystems with peers within their schools or microsystems, an essential step to creating a sense of belonging within the school or microsystem (Bone, 2015; Hoy & Hannum,1997). Participants chose to gravitate towards relationships that affirmed their gender and sexual identities despite heteronormative expectations.

Notably, participants in this study reported daily struggles to survive within hostile school climates that threatened their security and sense of belonging. The data indicated that leadership styles of heads from the selected schools had a negative impact on the school's climate, thereby promoting unhealthy interpersonal relationships, commitment to work, and respect for authority in the schools. Chirkina and Khavenson (2018) viewed school climate as the foundation by which teachers, students, and stakeholders base their feelings of connection to the institution of education; it sets the tone for the school and all relationships associated with it.

Smith and Shouppe (2018) listed the establishment of genuine relationships as the most crucial factor in creating a positive school climate for all stakeholders of the educational institution.

A comprehensive review of the South Georgia school district's policies and professional learning practices indicated no mention of sexual orientation or gender identity for students or staff. This is contrary to the assertion by Wright and Smith (2015; 2017) that LGBTQ educators need to feel included and supported by school and district leadership through actions and policies supportive of their LGBTQ status. Participants reported varying levels of support and job security within their schools and with district leadership. According to Collie et al. (2012), a teacher's sense of school climate, including relationships between administration, faculty, and students, can influence the teacher's self-confidence, job satisfaction, and stress. Based on the data, it is reasonable to speculate that the prevailing school environments characterized by hostility toward LGBTQ people may have constrained these participants from being the best teachers possible.

For example, participants admitted to having very little to no contact with the LEA. Regardless of the degree to which participants perceived the level of LEA support and security, they all voiced a general doubt and ambivalence toward issues of LGBTQ educators from the LEA. TM expressed skepticism toward his district's LEA, stating, "I don't trust it because you can't tell; you really cannot tell. You think you know." RA believed the LEA did not care about her because "a lot of the members of the board are perceived as being conservative." HM had no faith in the LEA, who did not "do anything necessary to support [LGBTQ educators]"; even so, she stated, "I don't feel insecure about my job." AJ condemned the hypocrisy of closeted gay LEA members who pretended to be straight. In frustration, AJ chastised these individuals' hypocrisy and shared the hate speech used in the past: "I do know some people up at the board

who really despise faggots. They've used those terms before." Although AJ had not had any personal experience with these closeted officials, he admitted knowing that individuals at the highest level hold such opinions was both troubling and threatening. AJ shared his deep sense of insecurity:

> That's where I feel a little bit insecure because I do know some people who were up higher that have said a lot of the same things. One mistake on my end and, you know, off with my head, and that that can be a little bit unnerving.

Contrary to the views held by other participants, EJ expressed a positive tone toward the LEA. He perceived them as an impartial group of professionals who judged teachers based on their professional performance rather than sexual orientation. EJ said,

> If you do your job, you have a job; if you don't do your job, regardless of what your sexual preference is, [you don't]. And that should be the way it is everywhere. Unfortunately, it's not, but here I think it is.

EJ reported feeling that evaluations were neutral and did not have the same challenges in this aspect of the educator role.

Overall, participants reported mixed opinions regarding their relationship with school district leadership. TM was appreciative of the backing from his superintendent and assistant superintendent, who were also parents of children enrolled in the same district. He shared his gratitude, saying, "They were extremely supportive. . . . Thank God, their children grew tremendously [in my class], so they seemed very appreciative, and they were supportive every time that anything came up." TM was pleased with the positive relationship and support from his administration.

Conversely, RA, who had recently married her partner, was unsure if the superintendent would accept her gay marriage and treat it with respect as she was the superintendent's daughter's teacher. She expressed her concern:

> I think it's pretty well known that you know that I'm in this relationship . . . especially this year with the student that I'll be having. I had his son several years back, but I believe that was really before our relationship, or maybe it was just starting up. So, this year, where we are married in an established couple, is that going to now affect even the way the superintendent not thinks of me but is it going to affect the way that I feel about my own job?

HM stated that of all the people at the LEA, she interacts the most with the superintendent and assistant superintendent, as "they've never said anything out of the way to me or to anybody I know." To HM, the absence of hate speech was indicative of support, or at least tolerance.

All participants judged their principals' attitudes toward LGBTQ issues and individuals through the lenses of religion and politics. Additionally, the teachers observed their principals' attitudes toward and relationships with their LGBTQ family members and students as an important factor concerning coming out to faculty. For instance, TM recognized the prejudiced nature of his school's culture upon hearing the previous administrator addressing an LGBTQ, gender-fluid child. TM described how the administrator ridiculed the child, saying, "[He] just raked that kid over the coals and commented that if the student continued to dress like that, he would not be able to protect the child. Positive relationships between faculty and administration establish positive expectations for students." Therefore, administrators who appear tolerant of homophobic or discriminatory actions struggle to create a positive school climate and work

environment for LGBTQ educators (Walton, 2005; Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). All participants reported working in such hostile environments that forced them to hide their sexual orientations due to fear of castigation as deviants for their regular lives outside of school.

Despite the overall hostility, AJ and TM discussed having more cordial relationships with female principals who were also mothers to LGBTQ children. AM and TM enjoyed working in a more tolerant environment under the female principal. AJ did not take the principal for granted; rather, he took his time to gain his principal's trust and respect by building rapport. He discussed this delicate relationship-building process:

> The relationships that you build with the administration. It is a frustration, right? I feel like it took me a year to build a very strong relationship with the principal; she and my mom went to school together. But I felt like it took me about a year. Because you have to know how to take her. . . . I wasn't sure if she would have a problem with my sexuality because she has a son who's gay, and I don't know how she takes it. She doesn't mention that. So, I don't know how she would take me. But after a year, I felt . . . that our relationship has just gotten better as I've stayed longer.

AJ also carefully studied his assistant principal's actions and behavior before building a relationship of trust with him. He stated, "I'll be honest here. At first, I really felt like maybe he was [homophobic]. Now that was just a perception. He never once showed any type of homophobia ever toward me. But that was my perception."

Slowly, over three years, AJ established respectful relationships with many of the administrators within his school and enjoyed their professional support. At the same time, TM had chosen to hide his personal life from his coworkers because he feared discrimination for being gay. However, this changed after the death of his partner of 30 years, when he realized he

could no longer survive in complete isolation. AJ had no choice but to take a risk to build some relationships and a sense of belonging. He shared,

> I was totally lost and just devastated, obviously. And so I had to tell the assistant principal for instruction and the principal. The academic coach was here, and she was very supportive. But it kind of forced my hand. We still limited our conversations to be very generic, which I appreciated. At that time, it was hard for me to deal with them, but they were very supportive. I couldn't have asked for better.

Similarly, RA found friendship and support in her principal, who even attended her wedding. RA is aware of this delicate relationship with her administrators and takes one day at a time. She presented this tenuous relationship:

> My principal now, he's lovely. He is just accepting and open. So I'm good with that. My assistant principal, I always felt that we have kind of a strained relationship anyway, and that was even prior to my relationship [with my wife]. I feel that recently, within the past year or two, we have a better relationship, but I don't know that has really any bearing on how she feels about our relationship. Dr. J, I think he was there. Maybe the first year Jane was teaching, he liked both of us individually. But because of his strong religious background—I knew he didn't have to say anything, but I knew that he wasn't very supportive of any type of homosexual relationship.

EJ also enjoyed a genuine friendship with his administrator in the Special Services Department. The administrator accepted EJ as one of them, inviting EJ to his home and even going on vacations together. EJ shared,

> We do things together, me and the director; she's married. We go off camping with my gay boyfriend, her kids. So, I think they try to include me as much as possible. They

> invite me to church and Christmas gatherings or whatever; they include me outside of school. And like I said, even as some of their husbands might be the most country redneck guy, but once they get past it: "He's gay. Yeah, but he's all these other things, too."

On the contrary, HM had a negative experience with a past homophobic principal who treated her badly upon finding out she was in a same-sex relationship. The principal showed a deep hatred of LGBTQ people by cutting short any interaction with HM. The principal reprimanded her for kissing her partner in the school parking lot, creating a hostile work climate for HM that eventually drove her from the school. HM's story mirrored Wright and Smith (2015), who found that LGBT educators at the elementary level felt less job security. HM had better luck at her new school, where the administrators treated her with respect and tolerance. Her new principal sanctioned her lifestyle and encouraged the staff to be accepting of one another. HM related,

> Some of them knew, and they would talk about it. But if anyone ever brought it up, I [had] always said, "Stop talking about our personal life," until this year. Mrs. LS wanted us all to get up and talk about ourselves. And everybody got up, and they're talking, and they're like, "Married to my husband. We were married X, Y, and Z," so I thought, "This year, I got married; [I] married my wife after five years. We have a little boy," and so all my students know this year if they didn't already know. It felt good because I feel like I've been hiding it. . . . If everybody else was going to talk about their personal life, then I've every right to talk about mine.

Participants had mixed experiences about their lifestyles. Some communities were more tolerant of differences, whereas others were filled with prejudice, making the teachers' lives

difficult and, in some cases, driving them from their jobs. Ahmed (2006b), Butler (2004), and Jagose (1996) associated the discrimination of LGBTQ individuals with heteronormative majorities within institutions. Wright and Smith (2015) found LGBTQ teachers subjected to antigay comments, antigay literature, and isolation. Social ostracism is "any act or acts of ignoring and excluding an individual or group by an individual or group" (Williams, 2001, p. ix). All participants in the study reported varying levels of ostracism when questioned regarding their experiences of homophobia.

AJ was aware that his coworkers behaved differently when he was around. AJ knew these were superficial friendships when he received ugly looks and general disdain. For AJ, such actions stung and were louder than words. He stated, "The way that they speak to me is different than they would if they were talking to Coach Z, who is a manly man." AJ was careful not to view all his colleagues the same. He shared, "We have several staff members here who are open-minded, who think . . . they just have that moderate point of view. They're okay with what you do as long as it doesn't affect [them]."

EJ's work environment became unbearable because of his coach, who did not bother to hide his hatred of EJ's lifestyle and went out of his way to make it hard for EJ to effectively carry out his job. EJ tried to convince this coach that they could peacefully coexist and work together in harmony if only he could change his hateful attitude toward him. He lamented, "I wanted to tell him, 'You're not going to catch it by shaking my hand or walking near me.'" EJ was convinced that men were more hostile to LGBTQ people than were women. He confessed, "I worked with a bunch of women. I think it's easier working with the women . . . but if I worked with a bunch of men, it would be a lot different."

HM had been traumatized by homophobic coworkers who do not want to have anything to do with her when they find out she is gay. She stated, "I have had people that have become less engaging when they found out. . . . There was just one person I can think of in particular. . . . Everything was okay; we talked or whatever. . . . [When she] found out, it was like they didn't engage with you as much or as authentically; that's just my perception of it." Conversely, a baby shower thrown for HM was a welcoming and positive signal affirming acceptance of LGBTQ educators. HM described the event:

> It was fun. Two other girls were pregnant, and we all had one [baby shower] together. My son got just as much as everybody else's child got. I mean, everybody treated me the same as anybody else. Once people found out that I was in a same-sex relationship, even before I got married, nobody ever said anything to me about it.

RA found that coming out has its problems when her coworkers disregarded her marriage and subsequent name change. This response was consistent with a heteronormative culture that perpetuates verbal and microaggressions and other behavioral or environmental indignities toward LGBTQ individuals (Resnick & Galupo, 2018). RA explained, "Rather than just call me [by my married name], they either want to refer to me with the previous name or refer to me by my first name, when that was never really a thing, and that's a little disappointing."

RA and HM confessed that, at times, they both felt ostracized by fellow faculty members. LGBTQ individuals often face social ostracism in small, interpersonal groups that reinforce social norms and behaviors (Riggle, 2017). RA presented her experience of ostracism at the hands of a fellow faculty member:

> A teacher that I was friends with prior to Jane really just turned her back on me. When Jane and I were dating, she became very jealous of our relationship and would literally

> just roll her eyes. If I say good morning, she wouldn't respond. I just turned her head. I mean, truly, just that obvious. When Jane and I got married, nobody really congratulated us. Nobody said anything about it.

RA and HM are both proudly married lesbians who do not allow petty prejudices to dampen their zeal for life.

Teacher-Student Relationships/To Be or Not To Be Out

This theme related to perceptions surrounding students, relationships with and mentorship of LGBTQ students, as well as how participants managed their outness at school. According to GLSEN (2019), students overwhelmingly reported hearing homophobic language in Georgia schools, including terms like "fag" and "dyke." Many LGBTQ students may not feel comfortable talking about sexual orientation issues with parents or other family members for fear of being rejected or kicked out of their home (Biddel, 2014; Johnson & Gastic, 2015; Mulcahy et al., 2016). According to Mulcahy et al. (2016), LGBTQ students informally choose mentors through feelings or vibes. Furthermore, students assess individuals' acceptance of diversity, political values, stereotypical gender roles, and the ability to be a good listener.

Only some participants were comfortable with the idea of an LGBTQ nanosystem such as a GSA to support themselves and LGBTQ students as this would require being out within the microsystem (Bone, 2015). Outness is a unique component of queer identity that heterosexuals in our society do not have to confront. Likewise, sexual orientation identity development can be supported by mentors and allies. Only some participants were willing to participate in this role within the school environment.

All participants heard homophobic comments from students to varying degrees. Even so, they viewed students as a whole to be a more tolerant and accepting group than the adults within

the school system and community. EJ, HM, and AJ had overheard students using derogatory language, such as "faggot," "dyke," and "queer." Like EJ, AJ dismissed the issue as ignorance of the subject of sexual orientation and immaturity. He said, "Most of them do not know what LGBTQ stands for or what really is behind that. So, I don't take offense from an 11-year-old or 12-year-old saying that to me."

HM and RA had similar experiences with students. HM observed that "students have made sly comments like 'dyke' before." Despite this hate speech, HM attributed any derogatory comment by students to their inability to communicate their feelings or an innate juvenile will to pick a fight. She related, "If anything, besides that little bit of whispering you might hear when you're walking by, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking they're probably saying, 'She's married to a woman.'"

Similarly, RA explained, "Most of the time, I think they see me as being the go-to gay person on campus. So, for me, it's not so much the homophobia as it is the kids wanting a resource or wanting support." RA's and HM's outlooks confirmed Wright and Smith's (2015) suggestion that supporting LGBTQ students seems to be one of the most problematic tasks of LGBTQ educators.

HM and RA were open about their sexual orientations and same-sex marriages with some reservations. While they do not mind being open to fellow faculty, they are hesitant to reveal their private lives completely. Thus, to preserve the intimate details, they chose not to display pictures of their families at school. HM discussed his colleagues, saying, "They'll have pictures of family and stuff up. I never felt comfortable doing that because gay marriage has only been legalized for, what, four years." RA echoed similar sentiments: "Even with pictures and stuff, you may go to a teacher's room, and you'll see his or her engagement pictures or their little

Christmas pictures together, but I've got individual pictures." Although RA and HM were secure enough to share limited views of their sexual orientation, they still faced constraints by the generally negative public opinion toward gay people to live their lives like everyone else. For example, RA and HM could not have the simple joy of displaying family pictures showing who they were. They were aware of the potential repercussions of such transparency. TM lamented, "I miss having my pictures. I have a great picture of us on a Carnival Cruise that I would love to have. But it's just one of those things that I have surrendered."

AJ, TM, and EJ chose to keep their private lives, including sexual orientation, out of the classroom and remain closeted to students and parents. Beginning LGBTQ educators expressed similar considerations about their reluctance to be out at school (Tomkins, Kearns, & Mitton, 2019). LGBTQ teachers must carefully consider the pros and cons of coming out to their colleagues and students because of the rigid anti-LGBTQ attitudes perpetrated by the Southeastern U.S. culture (Shelton & Lester, 2018). This makes it almost impossible for them to mentor LGBTQ students and, in turn, improve the school environment (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015). TM was especially leery about sharing his sexual orientation with students and parents, as he related,

> I don't tell them anything, nothing. There's an Aesop's fable that I teach every year. It's about an eagle that is shot down in midflight, and as he's dying, he looks, and the arrow has his own feathers in it. He had dropped off some feathers, and the hunter had used his own feathers against him. I feel like the more you give people, the more ammunition they have or can use against you.

LGBTQ educators may use ambiguous responses or ignore inquiries into their sexual orientations or simple deflection whenever the topic arises (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015).

TM and AJ wanted to model honesty to their students. TM stated, "I have a strong sense of integrity, so I'm not going to lie to them. . . . I just have tried to learn to do things that are truthful but not to divulge." Likewise, AJ took pride in getting to know his students but kept his sexual orientation out of bounds. AJ explained his decision and effort to keep his private life separate from students and parents:

> You have to be careful. Let me stop there and say this: I did not tell my children, my students, that I'm gay. I never [have] and I will never. Even when I've had students approach me regarding [that] they are gay, or they think they are, or they think they're bisexual, or they think they're transgender. They normally do. Those are the ones that approached me; they want to talk to me about it. I think that some of the parents do know, or they assume that I am. But I feel like it would become a huge issue if I just one day said, "You know what? I'm gay, guys." But I'm not going to tell them. So again, it's just my approach; I just have to be careful. I have to be very careful about the things I say.

EJ also used this strategy of maintaining clear boundaries with students and parents to conceal his personal life. EJ explained,

> I don't think you should be that close to your students; [that's] just me personally. Working with young people, it should never come out if you're straight, gay, whatever. To some degree . . . if they just would ask if I had a wife, I would say, no. I would leave it at that because there's a fine line about what you need to reveal to children.

Conversely, HM and RA were more obvious about their sexual orientation with faculty and students. Although RA was out to students, she maintained a strictly professional relationship with them that rendered aspects of her private life out of limits. RA described her experience:

> I just answer directly and move on. I don't elaborate. . . . I'm thinking about a Gemini cricket or something; there's something in the back of my mind that's reminding me, "Be careful what you say. Don't say too much. Don't go too far." I kind of watch the group because I don't know what kids are going to go back and tell their parents. . . . I'm very careful with what I say so that when a student goes back and tells their parent about their day at school, they're not going to then say, "Oh, yeah, my teacher, spent half the block talking about being married to a woman." Therefore, I'm very concise and direct with my answers.

HM noted that she recently come out after her principal encouraged each faculty member to share a little about themselves with the student body. Prior to this event, HM stated, "[Students] used to ask kind of leading questions, and I will just shut it down. You don't [need to] know about my personal life." She admitted that her relationships with her students were important, saying, "I guess now, being able to come out, even to my students, I think I'm more secure."

HM and RA are openly married lesbians who are aware of the dangers of full disclosure at school, hence their hesitancy to completely open themselves up by displaying family pictures at school. About her colleagues, HM stated, "They'll have pictures of family and stuff up. I never felt comfortable doing that because gay marriage has only been legalized for, what, four years." RA added, "Even with pictures and stuff, you may go to a teacher's room, and you'll see his or her engagement pictures or their little Christmas pictures together, but I've got individual pictures." RA and HM believed it was in their self-interest to limit public access to their personal lives. Likewise, TM stated, "I miss having my pictures. I have a great picture of us on a Carnival

Cruise that I would love to have. But it's just one of those things that I have that I've surrendered."

All participants avoided including LGBTQ issues in the curriculum. Like his peers, AJ believed that any attempts to incorporate LGBTQ issues into his teaching would inevitably cause undue stress and scrutiny for LGBTQ educators. However, if he were to become a curriculum and instruction director for a larger, more urban school district, he planned to integrate LGBTQ themes into the curriculum. AJ shared his career aspirations:

> I would like to be in a position like the director, whether it's just over a school or whether it's over a county and/or district, and hopefully work with board members and all stakeholders to incorporate LGBTQ issues . . . here in South Georgia. It would be a battle.

According to Compton (2016), communication is the primary tool for relaying the perception of sexual identity. This suggests that any solution to produce a positive school climate for LGBTQ students and educators should include communications within the organization's LGBTQ community and extend outward while focusing on building knowledge of self and others (Compton, 2016; McCready et al., 2013). The inclusion of LGBTQ-related content is legal in almost all states, and some states have included anti-discrimination provisions. However, a number of Southern states have laws limiting LGBTQ-related content within the sex education class curriculum (Biegel, 2010).

All participants confirmed the absence of LGBTQ-inclusive elements in any of the school district's curriculum. RA stated, "It doesn't exist. I just can't even fathom right now any support of said curriculum. I feel like it's still too taboo throughout the whole system." AJ felt that the only time the system came close to including LGBTQ issues was in the discussion of HIV, but

"they don't really touch on the homosexual part of HIV and AIDS." Regardless, AJ did not understand why LGBTQ studies did not receive the same recognition as religion in the curriculum. He rationalized,

> Some teachers, especially social studies, teach other religions, and you may not really care for it. And some parents don't care for it because they believe they are being taught how to worship that religion when they're just really learning. I think it would be more of the community having an issue.

EJ understood the sensitive nature of LGBTQ subjects because he came from a conservative family who never mentioned such topics. He was concerned that teaching LGBTQ issues was a hot topic that would shock the parents opposed to teaching sex education or the idea that people do not choose to be gay. EJ stated, "There's a fine line, and I don't know at what age that should be discussed." HM also noted the lack of LGBTQ-related issues in the curriculum.

> There's basically nothing. I've taught from elementary through high school, and there is nothing in the curriculum for anything about education in that area. I personally think that we do need to be inclusive because education is the key to make sure that certain things don't happen. . . . If you can educate, educate, educate, you can prevent a lot of issues that come up later in life. . . . I feel like people are scared of it, don't understand it. Their religious beliefs hold them back from trying to include that just to educate students on it.

Furthermore, RA was troubled that so many teachers were not willing to support students interested in debating the topic of same-sex marriage. She sympathized with a student who "was supposed to come up with the debate topic, and he wanted to do same-sex marriages and whether it should be made legal or not." The student's literature teacher said he could not use the topic of

same-sex marriage and that he would have to choose something else. RA said, "[That] really hurt his feelings because . . . that was his method of kind of supporting my relationship."

According to Fetner et al. (2012) and Kosciw et al. (2016), schools and school districts with active GSA clubs tend to have more inclusive environments and fewer instances of homophobic abuses. However, school administrators, faculty, and students, and community and conservative organizations often prevent the establishment of LGBTQ-friendly clubs, such as GSAs (Fetner et al., 2012). This rejection partly explains the scarcity of GSAs in rural South Georgia schools, which is contrary to participants' beliefs that GSAs and similar organizations provide positive, inclusive environments in which LGBTQ faculty and students feel welcome. However, participants' confidence in the district administration and community to support such an organization was low.

RA acknowledged, "What would help is to have just an open organization, [like] on some campuses and probably more progressive places where they have like friends of lesbians and gays." Conversely, EJ was skeptical that clubs or organizations supporting LGBTQ issues would be viable in the community. However, he felt these could help prevent suicidality and suicide, stating, "I think that is it worth getting 20 parents upset for saving three kids' lives." AJ added, "I would love to have what they call Safe Space. I would love to have that program here at our school, where we have select faculty members who have this Safe Space logo on their door." Unfortunately, LGBTQ students are less likely to have even one supportive adult outside of school and are more likely to plan and attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Coulter et al., 2017).

Given the apparent benefits of social support, AJ and HM offered to sponsor inclusive programs like the GSAs within the school system. HM stated,

> I would sponsor it if the student asked me, but you'd have to have permission from the parents for any student to be in that club. . . . The parents would have to be on board with it. . . . If I had to head it up, I would be willing, but then at the same time, you are a bit hesitant because I would be afraid that I would get that kickback from the community [and] from the board members.

Conversely, TM feared losing his job and did not want to be involved in any organization addressing LGBTQ issues or mentoring students. He stated the challenge in economic terms: "No, I like to get my house payment and stuff made." He had recently turned down two students who had asked for help in establishing a GSA at his school, as he discussed:

> They came to me, and they said, "We feel like you're a safe person." That's it. [I said], "Thank you, and I am. I'm a very safe person. Nothing that you say will leave me." . . . I said, "May I share this with the counselor and get her input?" because I wanted there to be two adults in the room. That's with any issues. . . . I want two people in the room if it's something personal like that. . . . We were very supportive, but we told them, "OK, so do some research." The principal said she wanted to know what's their purpose, how are you going to handle membership? What are they going to be doing and that sort of thing. The kids didn't really want to do any work. They just wanted a time period to meet and socialize.

As a former member of a GSA as an undergraduate, TM believed in the benefits of having a GSA; however, he relayed his concerns:

> It would be great if we [could, but] I don't think we're at [a point]. I don't know where you want to, ethically, draw the line with having like a GSA. Kind of like those groups like these girls wanted to start last year. I mean, I think that'd be a great thing eventually.

> Right now, it would be much more detrimental than it would be helpful. But eventually, if you could move into that direction—and I don't even know if you'd call it a [GSA]. . . . I don't know. I have misgivings about it.

HM framed the issue as part of a healthy school climate. The participant believed that LGBTQ individuals need friendly support organizations to feel welcome in their school. He shared,

> I don't think [they] do anything necessarily to support, but also there hasn't been anybody I don't think who has gone out of their way to, for instance, make a club. So, if they were to make a club, would the board support it, would they allow it? I don't know. I feel like that would be where the rubber meets the road.

Kosciw et al. (2016) affirmed that schools with an effective GSA provided a more positive school climate for LGBTQ educators and students. There were fewer instances of homophobic language and an increased likelihood that faculty members would intervene in cases of homophobic language compared to schools without GSAs. However, LGBTQ educators are often overburdened by feeling like the sole support system, mentor, or advocate for all LGBTQ issues within their schools (Tomkins et al., 2019).

Survival Strategies and Outlook to Future

This theme summarized the survival strategies LGBTQ participants adopted to survive in heterocentric school environments. As alluded to in the four themes representing the findings of this study, LGBTQ teachers in Southeastern Georgia schools face discrimination, homophobic microaggressions, intolerance, and a sense of job insecurity, a reality with which they cope daily. LGBTQ teachers constitute a small minority in Georgia's public school system. It is impossible to accurately estimate just how many LGBTQ teachers there are in Georgia. However, the

Williams Institute (n.d.) estimated that 4.5% of Georgia's population identify as LGBTQ. As of 2019, there were 116,065 teachers in the state of Georgia (Pelfrey, 2020). Based on these statistics, there may be just over 5,000 LGBTQ educators in the state.

The LGBTQ teachers in this study reported harassment and discrimination, which created negative school climates and contributed to educational problems, including teacher attrition. They identified several factors associated with negative attitudes toward LGBTQ teachers, including political conservativeness, religious attendance and beliefs, and gender. Administrators, teachers, parents, and students purporting to be religious fundamentalists exhibited intolerance and more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ teachers than individuals with progressive religious orientations. Men tended to be more hostile and less tolerant of LGBTQ teachers than women, often labeling LGBTQ individuals as inferior. However, participants found ways to overcome all this negativity and carry out their jobs as teachers. They employed three distinct strategies to advance professionally in the face of homophobia. EJ chose to be an invisible advocate, maintaining control over outness while fighting from the shadows. TM and AJ took a middle-of-the-road approach to outness and cultural norms. RA and HM vowed to fight and stand up for themselves as confrontational advocates. Microsystems or schools within the same school district may have its own school climate; however, each school is influenced by the same district leadership (LEA) or exosystem (Bone, 2015). Differences in their approach can be attributed to differences across microsystems (schools), mesosystems (supportive relationships), and the individuals' gender. Approaches differed in degree of resistance to heteronormative culture and expectations.

Invisible Advocate. EJ is a small, soft-spoken, shy, and reserved man with a tan accentuating his bleach-blonde hair and immaculately white teeth. He requested that the

interviews take place in the privacy of his office. EJ admitted to being more naively open regarding his sexual orientation until he found his contract not renewed following local board members' investigations into his sexual orientation. Since then, he has altered his approach to managing his career and visibility. EJ has since been an invisible advocate, retreating to a small but supportive department within the system, presenting himself as a role model of professionalism to the heterosexual majority, and refusing to be defined by his sexual orientation.

Although EJ was out within his department, he was comfortable leaving others to assume his sexual orientation. He described strategies focused on his invisibility and the ability to advocate for others from a distance. EJ stated, "After coming from the situation that happened [contract nonrenewal], I'm limited in what I want people to know, and so you are kind of guarded." EJ found the first school he taught to be too big, where he felt like a "fish out of water." He observed that women were accepting of his sexual orientation and that he needed a smaller, more supportive work environment. Baunach and Burgess (2013) explained that women are often not as bound by the traditional views of masculinity held by men, offering more flexibility regarding sexual identification. EJ thus enjoyed better relationships with female colleagues and found refuge within a small department where he is the only man. EJ described his working relationships with the women in his department:

> Well, I worked with a bunch of women. I think it's easier working with the women; they're a little more accept[ing], especially in early childhood education. You usually work mostly with females, so you don't really have problems. But if I worked with a bunch of men, it would be a lot different.

It is plausible to speculate that EJ felt safer as an invisible advocate because LGBTQ issues were verboten in the rural Southeast Georgia school district. He stated, "Being gay is not really talked about that much. Even in my family . . . we probably said the word three times." EJ was dismayed by the severe underrepresentation of LGBTQ in his school district. Worse still, LGBTQ teachers only gained a degree of recognition if they worked hard and produced tangible results. EJ reiterated the problem of underrepresentation and a possible way to improve their circumstances in the school:

> I think that there's probably not many [LGBTQ educators]. You probably have struggled trying to find people that would participate in this because there's not that many gay people. But I do think that if we're a positive influence, people see that and I think that it gets better.

EJ did not want others to define him as gay with no other desirable attributes. Rather, he desired recognition for his positive qualities that make the school a better place for teaching and learning. He shared,

> I think at the beginning; I did when I started here. Maybe overcompensate almost for [being gay], because like I said, people see you as being this, but I want to be seen as being a good worker, a good teacher, a good educator instead of just being a gay person.

EJ suffered a phenomenon coined by Meyer (2003) as "minority stress." This is a condition caused by stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, thereby creating a hostile and stressful social environment endured by LGBTQ people. Being a member of a marginalized group, EJ dealt with a sense of profound isolation. Being a transplant from another neighborhood, he did not socialize openly with other LGBTQ individuals within the school district. He explained, "I think that gay people stick together. I don't live here, so I don't really socialize here." EJ was

seriously considering relocating to North Carolina to be with his boyfriend. He preferred to conceal his sexual orientation for as long as he was at his current job. He stated, "I'm not going to wear a wedding ring or have a wedding in South Georgia. . . . I keep my private life private."

Furthermore, EJ recognized the risk of coming out to students in his current, very socially conservative Southern state. He explained, "I don't think you should be that close to your students. Just me personally, working with young people, it should never come out if you're straight, gay, or whatever." EJ was also skeptical of organizations or interventions regarding students' perceptions of homophobia or LGBTQ issues. EJ stated, "I think when the school steps in and starts offering things, you run into a whole different gamut of issues that could happen." He was concerned that there might not be enough LGBTQ students in Southeast Georgia to warrant the controversy. EJ acknowledged, "Again, that's just here in South Georgia; New York doesn't have that problem." It is not uncommon for some LGBTQ individuals who generally regard themselves as open to describe situations and events in which concealment is preferable (Malterud & Bjorkman, 2016). EJ did not believe the school system and community could approach LGBTQ issues effectively. He also feared his involvement would lead others to perceive him as just a gay man and not a teacher.

Middle-of-the-road approach. TM and AJ are both imposing figures, standing over six feet tall. At 52 years of age, TM is a soft-spoken, bearded man with an overly polite demeanor. AJ, in his early 30s, has a decisively dramatic manner and vocal tone and admitted that his appearance and mannerisms invite the assumption that he is gay. Both men are admittedly devout to their Christian faith, and both have had their share of homophobic harassment. Both of them managed their careers by taking a middle path between being out to some and hidden to

others. In their own way, both have established themselves and a network of acceptance while avoiding negative influencers.

TM and AJ took a middle-of-the-road approach in their interactions with other stakeholders and with their decisions of to whom and where to come out. Malterud and Bjorkman (2016) explained, “The social skill of going in and out of the closet in different social situations and with different people includes a profitability analysis, where the person calculates the gain versus the cost of disclosure in the particular context” (p. 1349). TM and AJ both went to great lengths to keep their sexual orientation out of conversations with students.

In general, the participants identified as liberal with regard to their political views on government and felt religion and politics within the Southeast Georgia school district and the South, in general, were intertwined. In particular, TM and AJ used political party preference as a strategy to identify faculty and staff who would not be supportive of LGBTQ educators or LGBTQ issues overall. TM shared, “I listen for politics all the time because people that are big Republicans are most of the time antigay. Most of the time, [but] not always.” Similarly, AJ reflected on his experience and sentiment regarding political conversations within the school and the community. He stated, “I’m an automatic libraturd, or whatever they say, or I’m a snowflake or just a fag Dem or whatever. I take it because I take politics very seriously.” These statements indicate that it is hard to separate homophobia, religion, and politics in rural conservative America (Barton, 2012; Boso, 2019).

AJ and TM assessed coworkers before disclosing their sexual orientation. McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2015) asserted that LGBTQ educators used measures in the decision-making process to come out that included cultural criteria encompassing geographic location and sociopolitical environment. TM explained that he “put out feelers” and listened very intently to

what other people said before divulging any information regarding his personal life or sexual orientation. LGBTQ teachers can seek to "humanize" themselves in the face of homosexual stigma through a complex, frequently messy process of negotiation involving more than just deciding to "show or hide" (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015, p. 295).

AJ and TM were more willing to acknowledge their LGBTQ status after learning that a school principal under whom they had worked had a gay son. AJ's former principal shared that her daughter was a lesbian and voiced her support of LGBTQ individuals before he decided to tell her he was gay. AJ believed having a principal with a gay son was a big reason he felt comfortable to apply for the job. Both participants reported having close open relationships with a limited number of faculty members they found supportive via the vetting process. AJ said of one such person, "We have some we've had some pretty in-depth conversations about different things, so she fully knows everything."

Accordingly, TM and AJ also noted recognizing fellow faculty members' negative attitudes and relationships with LGBTQ family members as reasons for not disclosing their sexual orientation. Both participants referenced specific coworkers to whom they would not, under any circumstance, come out or speak with regarding the issue of same-sex relationships. TM was wary of one such individual, saying, "He is very angry, and I don't know how to take any of them. [I] just stay away from them. He probably would be very antigay."

Gay men not perceived to fit the heteronormative perception of rural masculinity find less acceptance in rural communities (Kazyak, 2012). All participants reported placing some limits on the degree to which they shared their private life at school; using boundaries to maintain their school identities was a common approach. Remaining closeted protected them from discrimination, and openness kept them from the interpersonal demands of remaining closeted.

Managing the visibility of sexual orientation and focusing on problem-focused coping can offer balance for LGBTQ individuals (Lineback et al., 2016). AJ and TM placed considerable effort into keeping their private/social life separated from their experience as public school educators while still being out to a select group of faculty. TM, who lived in an adjacent county, stated, "I don't drive 2 hours a day and pass by about 50 schools by pure accident." TM and AJ maintained two personas, one as gay men and the other as professional educators. TM demonstrated physical separation by living in another county, which provided a geographic boundary between his work and private lives. He explained,

> I have two different worlds. I have my work life, and in my work life, I very much limit my personal information because I'm here to do a job; I'm here to do business. . . . I found a job here, and it was close to home but also allowed me to maintain private life and personal life.

AJ sacrificed his personal freedom when separating his private life from his work. He yearned to reclaim his full life by relocating to a larger city, such as Macon or Atlanta, where he could freely express himself and go out, date people, and socialize with other LGBTQ friends. AJ explained his concern:

> I do avoid having gay friends, avoid dating. I haven't dated in over four years because I don't want that to affect my job. I do not want to lose my job because of that, and around here, I feel like I could; it's possible that I could lose my job. Because legally, I'm not protected in the state of Georgia. . . . And so, they could fire me in the end. They don't have to say why.

Confrontational Advocates. Bettinsoli et al. (2020) attested that lesbians are more accepted than gay men in general. RA and HM capitalized on Bettinsoli et al.'s notion. They

took bold moves by settling in rural, conservative Southeast Georgia, getting married, and coming out to everyone in the school system, including students. Their behavior aligned with the argument made by Parra, Benibgui, Helm, and Hastings (2016) that sexual minorities who disclose their sexual orientation to friends and family enjoy better mental and physical health than counterparts who have yet to reveal such information. RA and HM would stand by this argument, and their confidence was evident during interviews.

Accordingly, RA's personality was as bohemian as her long, printed dress and shoeless feet. HM dressed in classic coach style, sporting khakis, and a school polo. She entered the interview with nervous confidence, bursting with enthusiasm for a chance to tell her story. RA and HM came out as the confrontational advocates who refused to take the blame for others' prejudices or hatred and chose to live like everyone else within the Southeast Georgia school district. They were also committed to improving the work and social environment for LGBTQ educators moving forward.

LGBTQ educators and their families also face the same conflicts between work and family (Sawyer, Thoroughgood, & Ladge, 2017). However, many LGBTQ individuals feel introducing their families personally and symbolically via photos risks politicizing the family. Sawyer et al. (2017) argued that LGBTQ individuals might feel pressured to separate work and family to avoid stigma and reprimand. Furthermore, LGBTQ individuals in the workplace may suppress or restrict information regarding the family, which can reduce opportunities and connections.

In the face of these dangers, RA and HM risked their jobs by coming out to faculty and students. Both women are out in their conversations with faculty and students; however, even they stopped short of displaying pictures of their same-sex families. RA resisted suppressing her

identity as a woman in a same-sex marriage. She challenged those within the school system to acknowledge her by her married name. RA stated, "My last name has changed, but it's how readily are these people adopting that. I'm still called by my previous last name a whole bunch, and I'm like, come on." Furthermore, RA openly corrected school staff when they assumed she was a heterosexual. She responded to a staff member's questioning of her sexuality:

> I said, "Yes, I'm married to a woman." He just said, "Oh, okay. That's fine. I just thought I might have heard you wrong." He's like, "I don't necessarily agree with it, but that's your life." I said, "Thank you." So with me, I'm not going to announce it. I just accept it, and if anybody has any questions—it would be no different if someone were to be in a heterosexual relationship and they asked you about your wife. You would just say, "Yes, I am married to a woman."

HM came out to many coworkers during her tenure at the district's middle school when she became pregnant through in vitro fertilization. She wanted them to treat her as any other pregnant woman and family. Her coworkers at the middle school responded positively and included her in a baby shower with other expecting faculty. HM described the event:

> We had actually gotten pregnant before it was legalized to get married. Yeah, we got pregnant five months before that. We didn't know it was going to be legalized. There were two other girls that were pregnant at the same time, and so we all had [a baby shower] together. And my son got just as much as everybody else's child got.

HM and RA did not discuss having a difficult time coming out to faculty and students. This finding is consistent with the *Associated Press* (2013) report, which indicated that lesbians seem to have an easier time than gay men do. More recently, Bettinsoli et al. (2020) found gay men less accepted than lesbians not just in the United States but in many countries, which may

have allowed RA and HM to be more vocal regarding LGBTQ issues within their schools and community. Bettinsoli et al. also determined that society is more comfortable with the idea of lesbians parenting children. I was intrigued that the two lesbian participants received significantly less social backlash than the men in this study. It is reasonable to speculate that HM and RA, by virtue of their gender, occupied the role of nurturers; hence, no one questioned their ability to raise children. HM neatly captured this view:

> My principal wanted us all to get up and talk about ourselves. Everybody got up, and they're talking like I'm married to my husband. We were married X, Y, and Z. So, this year, I said, "I've been married to my wife for five years. We have a little boy," and so all my students know this year if they didn't already know. I feel like I've been hiding it . . . I didn't wanna hide it anymore, and if everybody else was going to talk about their personal life, then I've every right to talk about mine. And one thing that I noticed throughout . . . I think it is going to be in any school system, not just this one.

RA freely spoke of her wife, a former teacher within the school district. She shared, "I know, even with Jane, she's a female teacher, but she would wear masculine clothes; she would wear ties and bow ties and stuff. . . . That might not be just the norm for a heterosexual person." RA felt that her wife's dress and outward masculine gender expression was offensive to some of her coworkers, who often criticized LGBTQ students' expression of a gender other than their biological one. RA went so far as to confront teachers in a meeting after her wife left the school and advised them that not answering e-mails and ostracization did not help her wife feel accepted.

Despite advocating for her wife, RA confessed that she and Jane often go out of town for dates and to socialize away from the judgment of their hometown. RA described her rationale behind the decision:

> I think now, especially within our own community, when we go out of town . . . we're just visiting that community, that city or town. And so maybe there, you don't have to worry as much or think as much just because you're not living there. And so there's more hand-holding, or just walking arm and arm, or just sitting very close to each other. Whereas here, you know, it's probably just not as frequent.

Due to a lack of protection and a judgmental community, even the confrontational advocates in this sample felt the need to put up boundaries between their school and personal lives.

Although RA and HM could transcend what femininity looked like and negotiate the mainstream space a little bit more than their male counterparts, they still faced discrimination in their schools, albeit less. In particular, they were concerned by the moral turpitude clause utilized by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and included in the contracts of school district-certified employees. HM felt Georgia's Code of Standards could be a way for school administrators to address and discriminate based on sexuality. She stated, "I heard that Trump said something the other day about maybe it was OK to fire someone for being gay or being transgender." RA wanted clarification regarding the moral turpitude clause:

> We are supposed to be these moral beacons within education. You know, because I am married to a woman, am I now considered not a good role model or not a good representation of what an educator should be?

Furthermore, both women called for the establishment of LGBTQ organizations to represent their unique needs in friendly civic institutions. According to RA, a formal

organization, such as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, would be helpful. She stated, “I had an openly gay student in my class, and he was super excited because it was something where I think he and some other students, some of his friends, approached the principal and asked about having this organization.” Likewise, HM stated, “So if they were to make a club, would the board support it, would they allow it? I don’t know. I feel like that would be where the rubber meets the road.” LGBTQ educators can serve as positive role models for LGBTQ students when they feel comfortable, supported, and free from homophobic harassment (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). Both educators stated that they became the “go-to” gay person at their school and that they would be more than willing to participate in a future GSA or professional development regarding LGBTQ issues. HM advised that she was not afraid to stand up and use her story to advocate for LGBTQ individuals within the system and community. She captured this dedication to openness:

> I have become very open in the community. I feel like if the school system ever asked me to, or anybody in the district ever asked me to or my wife to, we will be very open about sharing our story, our struggles, what coping mechanisms we’ve used to better integrate ourselves within the community and not just isolate ourselves, to better educate people about our small, little community of LGBTQ in this in this bigger community, I would definitely be open to sharing my story or sharing my views. If anybody ever asked, I would definitely do that.

It is plausible to speculate that confrontational advocates were less stressed due to bringing their whole selves to work (Parra et al., 2016), and thus being better prepared to teach and help students learn.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the major themes that emerged as participants shared their experiences as LGBTQ educators teaching in a rural South Georgia school system. The themes became evident from the intensive analysis of interview transcripts, personal memos, and participant reflections. The final themes were a result of the study's research questions. The four major themes that emerged were (a) LGBTQ identity/fear of community, (b) LGBTQ identity/ school relationships, (c) teacher-student relationships/to be or not to be out, and (d) survival strategies and outlook to future. Through their responses, participants provided an in-depth understanding of their actions and decisions to establish successful careers as LGBTQ educators in a rural Southeast Georgia school system.

As LGBTQ-identifying individuals, they experienced homophobia and instances of harassment. Participants felt they had to make choices between work and their private lives while constructing an identity performance that led to a successful career in education. Furthermore, data indicated how participants foresaw improvements for themselves and LGBTQ students.

Each theme received discussion using the participants' own words to confirm the relevance of the themes concerning their status as LGBTQ educators succeeding in a rural Southeast Georgia school system. Furthermore, quotes from the interviews showed the educators' perceptions of the macrosystems, the policies directly affecting their decisions within the microsystems, as well as the exosystems, the community, and the school district. These themes provide a basis for suggestions in professional development, policy, and practice in the next chapter.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate, LGBTQ educators reported a negative school climate and feared harassment or termination if their LGBTQ status became known (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). I explored the life and career experiences of identified veteran LGBTQ faculty members' fear of harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known, and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. I conducted this study at a rural Southeast Georgia public school system that included strengthening cultural competency, teacher retention, and recruitment of minorities in its 5-year plan. I sought to understand the experiences, strategies, and needs of LGBTQ educators living and working in rural Southeast Georgia.

The GaDOE uses Standard 2 of LKES to support an open school climate that encourages sincere relationships among all stakeholders, providing the trust necessary to take risks to improve instruction, professional decisions, school climate, and job satisfaction (GaDOE, 2020; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; McCarley et al., 2016). However, such an inclusive school environment in the rural South is constrained by political and social conservative values that limit LGBTQ teachers and students (Swank et al., 2012). LGBTQ faculty endure various forms of homophobic abuses in the rural South (Kosciw et al., 2016; McCready et al., 2013; Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019).

I critically analyzed the shared experiences of LGBTQ educators living and working in rural Southeast Georgia and identified four emergent conceptual themes, which are the findings

of this study. The primary data sources were interviews, observations, and school documents. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the life and career experiences of identified LGBTQ veteran educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district?

RQ2: Do identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known?

RQ3: If identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination, what strategies have they used to manage their careers?

I used purposeful sampling to identify five veteran LGBTQ educators with at least five years of service and summative TKES evaluations of Level III or above. As outlined by Seidman (2013), I conducted a three-interview process, collecting and analyzing data over nine months. I transcribed all interviews, allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of the content and to check and reflect on their shared perspectives (Maxwell, 2013). I also used self-reflection via memos and voice notes to acknowledge my own bias and subjectivity as a heterosexual, cisgender male educator.

I used MAXQDA software to analyze the interview transcripts. Initial data analysis involved reducing data into small conceptual units followed by grouping into larger codes, as suggested by Maxwell (2013). I then read and reread the transcripts, searching for commonalities within the assigned coded segments of data. The third and final phase of coding involved connecting the data by establishing relationships between categories. I grouped data into related categories and created a qualitative codebook to organize the identified categories into potential themes. Finally, I conducted a cross-case comparison to identify relationships among categories, derive meaning from relationships, and answer the research questions. In this chapter, I analyze

and interpret the findings, answer the research questions, and address the limitations of the study. I also discuss research, policy, and practice implications as well as recommendations for those vested in the success of LGBTQ educators living and working in rural Southeast Georgia.

Research Questions: Summary

In this section, I align the research questions with the summary of the findings in the themes and conceptual framework.

Research Question 1

RQ1 was, What are the life and career experiences of identified LGBTQ veteran educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district? Although participants had unique personal backgrounds and teaching experiences, noticeable similarities emerged. Themes used to answer RQ1 were (a) LGBTQ identity/school relationships and (b) teacher-student relationships/to be or not to be out.

All participants expressed an affinity for learning and excelled in their K-12 education. RA was the valedictorian of her high school class. EJ graduated at the top of his class. TM was the president of North Carolina's chapter of Future Teachers of America. HM and AJ graduated at the top of their high school classes.

AJ, EJ, and RA grew up in Southeast Georgia, HM was from rural Northeast Georgia, and TM was from rural North Carolina. Although they were not out during middle or high school, all participants reported hearing homophobic slurs and comments as students. All experienced homophobia and/or homophobic harassment during their primary and secondary education.

Experiences of homophobic harassment and discrimination, as described by AJ and TM, can be especially harmful to an individual's emotional and physical well-being. Wofford,

Defever, and Chopik (2019) found experiences of discrimination associated with mental and physical health issues, the effects of which may be partially due to the stress and emotions that accompany discrimination.

TM and AJ reported having homophobic harassment and slurs directed at them. TM described a physical assault by classmates who suspected he was gay. “A group of boys got me held me, and pinned me down, and they peed all over me. They said, ‘You like dick so much, here,’ and they peed all over me.”

AJ discussed the direct homophobic harassment he endured during the eighth and ninth grades as he attempted to become a male cheerleader. AJ was the target of homophobic slurs and harassment from faculty, students, and parents as they tried to dissuade him from joining the squad. However, his goal came to fruition via the advocacy of his mother. AJ was so traumatized by this experience that he did not date during high school and took his mother’s advice to conceal his sexual orientation as their “little secret.”

The participants’ accounts of homophobic abuses were consistent with Kosciw et al.’s (2016) finding that students in the rural Southern United States have historically reported enduring homophobic harassment and language at higher rates than other regions of the country. All participants except for RA learned to navigate life as LGBTQ individuals within schools, specifically, those located in the rural Southeast (Biddel, 2014; Johnson & Gastic, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2016; Lineback et al., 2016; Mulcahy et al., 2016).

TM, HM, AJ, and EJ did not come out until they were in college. It is not uncommon for rural LGBTQ students to come out later than their urban counterparts (Kosciw et. al., 2016). HM and EJ were unable to talk to their mothers due to an intolerant, homophobic family culture. All participants were isolated and ultimately rejected by family members because of their sexual

orientation. HM stated, “I couldn’t tell my mom, or I felt like I couldn’t tell my mom.” EJ said, “I’ve been gay my whole life, I guess, but I didn’t come out ‘til I was in my 20s.” Only EJ was unable to identify a friend or family member in whom to confide. He attributed the inability to talk openly with his family to his mother’s and brother’s religious bigotry. Barton (2012) explained the reluctance to identify as LGBTQ as the basis for a “toxic closet,” which stifles self-awareness. Furthermore, LGBTQ students often do not feel comfortable talking about sexual orientation issues with parents or other family members for fear of rejection or being kicked out of their home (Biddel, 2014; Johnson & Gastic, 2015; Mulcahy et al., 2016).

All participants endured harassment in their communities for being LGBTQ. Lineback et al. (2016) and Wright et al. (2019) confirmed LGBTQ educators’ experiences of harassment, bullying, and ostracism from their schools and communities. Participants believed that hatred toward them stemmed from strict community conservative values that encouraged people to shun LGBTQ lifestyles. Of her community, HM stated, “It is a very Christian, probably the most Christian place I’ve ever lived in my life.” TM was not comfortable in his community, which he likened to his childhood Southern conservative town, saying, “I don’t trust it.” EJ was wary of violent confrontations against LGBTQ people at restaurants in his neighborhood. AJ and RA reported being the recipients of slurs such as “faggot” or “queer” while walking through a store parking lot to buy groceries. EJ lamented, “I’m not deaf. I hear little things,” in response to kids at the local Walmart calling him gay. AJ and EJ refused to feel threatened but could not help feeling harassed. AJ stated, “It can be rough around here,” but he had developed a thick skin and had no physical assaults, “knock on wood.”

RA felt threatened by “people in the park … yelling, ‘Faggot, die.’” She felt especially worried about the incident when she had one of those children as a student the following year

and did not know how to deal with him. Participants' experiences were consistent with Swank et al.'s (2012) finding that LGBTQ individuals living in rural or urban areas of the Southern United States endure more discrimination and verbal threats than their urban counterparts.

EJ did not have his teaching contract renewed because of his sexual orientation. HM had to transfer to another position in the Southeastern school district after her previous principal accused her of kissing her wife in the school parking lot and ostracized her. TM quit his job as Dean of Students at a community college after attending a faculty picnic with his life partner and finding himself out of favor with his superior.

All participants experienced homophobic verbal abuse from students and parents and a myriad of homophobic microaggressions within the Southeastern school district. Participants also expressed subtler homophobic microaggressions and heteronormative gender identity expectations, such as masculinity and femininity. HM was concerned that she appeared to be stereotypically lesbian (butch), and TM was offended by male coworkers making statements that a faculty t-shirt would "make them look gay." EJ complained about a coach who refused to interact with him, saying, "I wanted to tell him, 'You know, you're not going to catch it by shaking my hand or walking near me.'"

HM, RA, and TM missed the joys of wedding bliss afforded to heterosexual couples. For example, HM was afraid to have a public wedding ceremony, fearing the community's scorn. TM opted to skip the fanfare of a traditional wedding for a private ceremony with only his spouse and the priest. RA decided to invite her coworkers to their wedding, yet gave up the public show of affection for fear of offending their guests. Boso (2019) and Kazyak (2012) explained these behaviors within socially conservative, rural Southern culture, which requires a

measure of sameness and demands members exercise humility to appear as authentic and good people.

All participants unequivocally rejected conservative religious beliefs used to denounce LGBTQ lifestyles. AJ and EJ reflected on childhood church preachers who advocated Hell for LGBTQ people. EJ stated, "You know, growing up here, if you're gay, you're going to burn in Hell, so it's kind of hard to justify going to church all the time." Although all participants found themselves rejected by religious institutions, TM and RA maintained their faith and migrated to gay-friendly Episcopal churches. It is reasonable to speculate that TM's and RA's adherence to religion was a way to stay connected with their rural community (Boso, 2019; Kazyak, 2012). Southern LGBTQ educators in conservative rural areas perceive religion as a double-edged sword, condemning via antigay teachings (Fetner et al., 2012) while providing a source of love and support that fosters an acceptance of their authentic identity (Rosenkrantz, Rostosky, Riggle, & Cook, 2016).

Research Question 2

RQ2 was, Do identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known? Answering this question was by all four themes of this study. I found strong evidence that showed participants' fear of losing their jobs and being subjected to undue harassment, bullying, and ostracism by their schools and communities for being LGBTQ. Georgia rural school districts do not provide specific protections for LGBTQ individuals. There is no mention of LGBTQ protections in the school district policy documents, only protections against discrimination in employment practices based on race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or sex. Currently, in Georgia, only Fulton and DeKalb counties offer protections for sexual orientation

(Movement Advancement Project, 2020). Without specific protections, LGBTQ individuals are subject to informal inequalities, such as the obsolete "don't ask, don't tell" military policy meant to silence dialogue and assume heteronormativity (Cech & Rothwell, 2020). LGBTQ educators in the Midwest and Southeast are less comfortable in their outness than in other regions of the country (Wright et al., 2019). Additionally, LBGTQ educators living and working within rural areas perceive less support and more risk (Boso, 2019; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Swank et al., 2012).

All participants lived in perpetual fear of losing their jobs for being LGBTQ. AJ shared his concern, saying, "I could lose my job because legally I'm not protected in the state of Georgia, and so they could fire me in the end. They don't have to say why." Although EJ had 26 years in education and 19 years of service in the Southeast Georgia School District, he believed he had lost a previous job due to his sexual orientation, with his contract not renewed following school board inquiries into his sexual orientation. EJ became very sensitive about what he said or did in public for fear of losing subsequent jobs. Kahn and Gorski (2016) confirmed that nonrenewal and moral turpitude clauses are the usual means to terminate LGBTQ educators.

TM believed his school's ethics training module prevented him from sharing his sexual orientation with students. He stated, "It's in there. Really, in that training module . . . I guess that assumes that only gay people." This made him feel less secure in his job than his heterosexual faculty members. He was candid in saying, "I don't have job security."

All participants believed they were in their positions at the mercy of community members and school and district leaders. They relied on supportive relationships with the principal and some faculty to keep their jobs but remained skeptical of the LEA and fearful of community and parental accusations. Hoy and Hannum (1997) and McCarley et al. (2016) asserted that teachers

improve their instruction when supported by their administrators and district leaders within an open school climate that encourages sincere relationships among all stakeholders and provides trust to take risks. Although HM did not think her sexual orientation was a threat to her job security, she felt excluded from backroom conversations and, therefore, could not know the full extent of others' homophobic attitudes within the Southeast Georgia school system. HM noted that although she had reservations regarding administrators' true feelings for LGBTQ individuals, she trusted the administrators more than community members because they at least were educated on LGBTQ issues. HM explained, "Joe Blow out there in the community who may have dropped out of high school or might have a high school education, they just fall back on religion, and they are a lot scarier to me and my safety." RA complained of a lack of protection from verbal attacks by parents. He lamented, "If there is a complaint, you know, am I going to be supported? No, I'll probably be told, 'Just make sure you don't talk about your relationship.'"

RA was always worried about others labeling her as being morally unfit to be an educator by virtue of being a lesbian. She stated:

> I am in this homosexual relationship; that is some kind of moral offense to people, and I do consider that sometimes. . . . We are supposed to be these moral beacons within education. . . . Because I am married to a woman, am I now considered to be not a good role model, or not a good representation of what an educator should be? And is that literally just judgment on me, judging my own morals?

HM felt continuously reminded of her unacceptable lifestyle by biblical scriptures, causing her undue anxiety. She stated the "Joe Blow out there in the community who may have

dropped out of high school or might have a high school education, they just fall back on religion, and they are a lot scarier to me and my safety."

All participants presented an interesting paradox in which, on one side, they felt threatened by their conservative Christian fellow faculty members, administrators, and board members, and on the other, found solace in their religious beliefs. I was particularly surprised by HM, who identified as agnostic yet "prayed" for a better community in which to raise her child. Ultimately, participants accepted the Christian value of love for all, which they believed was not practiced by the Southern conservative Christians.

The experiences of participants within the study were consistent with Wright and Smith's (2015) assertion that despite recent advances in the equal treatment of LGBTQ educators, school climate continues to be a source of stress. This is especially true given the high levels of homophobic language and harassment within the school environment, especially within the Southern United States. As a result, LGBTQ educators continue to fear losing their jobs (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019).

Research Question 3

RQ3 was, If identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination, what strategies have they used to manage their careers? This question aligned with the following themes: (a) LGBTQ identity/school relationships, (b) teacher-student relationships/to be or not to be out, and (c) survival strategies and outlook to future. Participants employed various strategies to manage their careers, including concealing or revealing their sexual orientation through reciprocity, ambiguity, deflection, and avoidance. Participants fell into three related but distinct groups concerning the management of their careers in the Southeastern school district.

First, EJ, the invisible advocate, used concealment as a survival and management strategy to manage his career. His homophobic school community led him to hide his private life from colleagues, administrators, and parents for fear of homophobia, exclusion, or lack of consideration for valuable promotions. As illustrated in the previous chapter, EJ used different methods to make himself invisible, including efforts to blend into a small but supportive environment of supportive women away from students' derogatory comments and faculty's heteronormative microaggressions. This finding is consistent with Fidas and Cooper (2019), who revealed that nearly two thirds (59%) of non-LGBTQ employees believed it was "unprofessional" to discuss sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace. This strategy prevented EJ from being the best teacher he knew he could be. Trying to hide his identity left him exhausted from spending time and energy concealing his sexual orientation. The strategy adversely affected EJ's work performance because individuals who do not feel comfortable and happy tend to underperform as they try to hide who they are. This finding indicates the dire need for school leaders to be active and visible in demonstrating support for their LGBT teachers to improve teaching and learning.

Secondly, AJ and TM opted for a partial concealment strategy, referred to in Chapter V as the middle of the road. These participants chose to disclose or not to disclose their sexual orientation depending on the prevailing situations. Thus, they tended to be more open when they felt social support for their stigmatized identity—that is if the social environment was welcoming and accepting of LGBTQ identities. They also opened up when surrounded by supportive non-LGBTQ orLGBTQ people and within LGBTQ movements or organizations sympathetic to LGBTQ people.

On the other hand, AJ and TM resorted to avoidance strategies whenever they anticipated a negative outcome, such as rejection and even retaliation, in which case the decision was to continue concealing their stigmatized identity. AJ explained, "I just do not want [sexual orientation] to get in the way of my professional career. So, I weigh the options. . . . I don't want to get to that point where I have to be confrontational about it." This finding aligns with Chaudoir and Fisher's (2010) process of stigmatized identity disclosure. The researchers found that LGBTQ people struggle with whether to disclose or conceal their identity every time they are in a new circle; accordingly, the stages of doubt and disclosure with feedback may be ongoing. AJ captured this model, saying, "Before I tell anyone, one, you get to know that person. You kind of know when you talk with someone, you can kind of tell whether they will be accepting that you are different."

Third, RA and HM pursued an open confrontational strategy. These two ladies were proud and happy to be authentic in their identity at work. Based on the data, it is reasonable to speculate that coming out made them better coworkers and better teachers. HM captured this sense of pride and liberation:

> I feel like I've been hiding it, and it's just to the point, you know, I didn't wanna hide it anymore, and if everybody else was going to talk about their personal life, then I've every right to talk about mine.

Moradi (2009) found sexual orientation disclosure had a positive direct relationship with social cohesion and a positive indirect relationship with task cohesion. This finding provides a good foundation for evaluating school district climate and inclusion policies and practices regarding sexual orientation.

Participants found this confrontational strategy met with mixed responses from administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Some people were indifferent. HM's acceptance was on full display when she participated in a baby shower involving straight expectant mothers. Some people were awkward, choosing not to discuss the issue. Compton (2016) asserted that often employees are unprepared to engage in communication regarding matters of sexual orientation; therefore, education is needed on how to discuss issues retarding LGBTQ employees. Some responded negatively, using slurs or discriminating against LGBTQ individuals. Others said sexually explicit things or asked sexually explicit questions. Despite these mixed responses, RA and HM remained patient with themselves and their coworkers. Understanding what is and is not appropriate helped them deal with all kinds of responses.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if identified LGBTQ veteran faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. Through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, I gave a voice to a select group of veteran LGBTQ educators from one Southeast Georgia school district to discuss their life and career experiences, fears, and strategies to manage a hostile school climate. Participants shared stories of their K-12 education, college experiences, and navigation of their professional careers living and working in rural Southeast Georgia. They also discussed growing up as LGBTQ in the South. Participants related traumatic stories of harassment and physical assault that marred their childhood and influenced their careers as LGBTQ educators. The teachers also discussed the strategies they used to establish successful careers within a school climate hostile to LGBTQ individuals. I presented the findings of this study in four major analytical themes: (a)

LGBTQ identity/fear of community, (b) LGBTQ identity/school relationships, (c) teacher-student relationships/to be or not to be out, and (d) survival strategies and outlook to future.

The five veteran LGBTQ educators in this study revealed several common issues. First, all participants experienced violence, threats, or harassment because of their sexuality or gender identity. They reported slurs, offensive comments, and negative assumptions about their sexual orientation from colleagues, administrators, students, and the community. Furthermore, they endured a wide range of discrimination at work; in their interactions with colleagues, students, parents, and administrators; and in their everyday lives and neighborhoods. They attributed most of the hostilities to stereotypical beliefs about LGBTQ individuals—for example, some parents characterized male homosexuals as likely to be child molesters. It is reasonable to speculate that the intolerance of LGBTQ individuals by church groups reflected a historical religious bias.

Second, the school district as an organization feared that openly hiring homosexuals might weaken the system's reputation and reduce community trust. Therefore, it is sensible to speculate that school leaders maintain a hostile climate toward LGBTQ teachers because their prime motive is to be politically correct and uphold a clean image. Worse still, participants did not have local school policies to protect them from homophobic attacks. Furthermore, participants highlighted their quest to find supportive allies within the heteronormative majority. The study showed that participants struggled to find safe zones of acceptance for themselves, absent any guidance from administration and district leaders.

Third, the participants indicated that LGBTQ educators remain closeted to students or approach teacher-student relationships with extreme care if out to students. Participants revealed an interesting dichotomy, with the increasing number of LGBTQ students regarded by all as the

future of LGBTQ equality within the rural Southeastern school district. However, the youth were absent needed mentors.

Fourth, I identified three significant survival strategies used by participants in their quest to manage their careers. The first strategy was being the invisible advocate, which entailed trying to blend into a small department to avoid standing out from the mainstream heteronormative majority and taking refuge in a group of accepting women. The invisible advocate buried himself in mentoring work as a way of deflecting people's attention from his sexual orientation. Second, others tried to navigate a middle line between being out and closeted, with mixed outcomes. These individuals were not ready to completely give up their freedom but were still mindful of their existence in an environment where many shunned and abhorred their lifestyles. Finally, two lesbians chose to confront their challenges head-on and live their lives to the fullest. Their struggle was not as difficult as gay men because lesbians are more accepted (Bettinsoli et al., 2020). According to Kaur and Stephen (2019), confrontation has a significant relationship with openness, trust, action, and experimentation. This may explain why these two women did not feel the burden of being gay. Readily accepted by the community, the women could step out with their same-sex marriages and became de facto mentors.

In this study, I found that veteran LGBTQ educators of the Southeastern Georgia school district work in an environment in which they are always fighting for recognition as equal members of their school communities. Although federal policies, and sometimes school policies, are in place to help create a positive learning environment, the participants still struggled to change people's deep-seated negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people. I believe that attitudes tend to shape school cultures of intolerance toward LGBTQ teachers. I was able to capture the lived experiences of these marginalized teachers and bring attention to the glaring difficulties

they faced. The stories conveyed a picture of individuals who cannot fully execute their professional roles and responsibilities due to a pervasive school culture of intolerance and prejudice based on their alternate sexual orientations. Participants continually cited cases of feeling stereotyped, harassed, and discriminated against by individuals and the system as a whole. Researchers have confirmed these findings (e.g., Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Jennings, 2015; Kazyak, 2012; Kearns at al., 2014; Lineback et al., 2016; McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Mulcahy et al., 2016; Rottmann, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Swank et al., 2012; Wright, 2009; Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). Through this study, I exposed the challenges of teaching while being LGBTQ and the education system's failures to capitalize on and celebrate the difference among citizens that make the United States a great nation.

I revealed rural dynamics that compounded the difficult situations of LGBTQ teachers in a rural South Georgia school district. Rural schools are more embedded in conservative cultures than urban ones. Fahs and Swank (2020), Kosciw et al. (2016), and Sahni et al. (2016) have amply demonstrated the high levels of intolerance toward LGBTQ people. Wienke and Hill (2013) found that rural living is incompatible with the needs and wants of gay men and lesbians. They argued that rural areas are not conducive to gay people's well-being, as reflected in self-reports of happiness, health, and work satisfaction. LGBTQ people living in rural areas face the problem of isolation. Participants in this study complained of being "the only gay in the village." They found rural life stressful and traditional. It is important to point out that LGBTQ people are homogeneous individuals with distinct personalities leading them to feel more at home in different environments. They can build lives in those environments that do not necessarily fit broad sociological stereotypes. I understand that urban life makes being LGBTQ mean more, but

I am also aware that some gay men in my Southern hometown are happy with the meaning they find in life.

Connecting the finding to my Conceptual Framework

Using queer and the bioecological theories as conceptual lenses, I was able to fully understand the experiences of veteran LGBTQ educators in a rural Southeast Georgia School District. Consistent with queer theory, participants had no specific protections assured by the school or district leadership and were left powerless, absent any recourse to harassment. They felt that any protection for their jobs would have to come from the management of their career. Unlike their heterosexual colleagues, they had to consider the impact and risk of revealing their sexual orientation within the community, school district, and school. Therefore, participants attempted to construct a supportive system of relationships and avoid anti-LGBTQ hostility to manage their outness and careers within their prospective schools.

The bioecological theory of school climate highlighted the fears veteran LGBTQ educators had of the district's community. The local education agency functions to ensure the representation of the community's needs, beliefs, and values in K-12 education. Therefore, participants felt the broader community or exosystem judged them as immoral influences on students. Participants saw the community exosystem as an outside influence that was more powerful than any principals or district leaders' protection. This left participants to rely on managing their sexual orientation and establishing accepting and supportive relationships or mesosystems found within their schools or microsystems as their primary source of security. Therefore, participants were forced to weigh the risks and rewards of revealing their sexual orientations with regard to the macrosystem of southern culture, exosystem of community, microsystem/school, and mesosystem/relationships within the school. Table 4 below illustrates

the appropriateness of the queer and bioecological theories as the best lens through which experiences of LGBTQ teachers can be understood.

Table 4

Connections Between Findings and Conceptual Framework

Theme	Ecological Theory of School Climate	Queer Theory
1. LGBTQ identity/fear of community: Participants feared the perceptions of the community in regards to their sexual identity.	The community or exosystem, as well as the southern culture of the macrosystem affected school climate within each microsystem despite the general progression of LGBTQ rights across the chronosystem.	Participants did not find policies/practices that supported their identity due to pervasive heteronormativity and microaggressions.
2. LGBTQ identity/school relationships: Participants developed professional relationships in the absence of school climate policies that explicitly protect LGBTQ teachers from discrimination.	Participants fostered supportive relationships (mesosystems) with peers within their microsystems.	Participants chose to gravitate towards relationships that affirmed their gender and sexual identities despite heteronormative expectations.
3. Teacher-student relationships/to be or not to be out: Perceptions surrounding students, relationships with and mentorship of LGBTQ students, as well as how participants managed their outness at school.	Only some participants were comfortable with the idea of a LGBTQ nanosystem to support themselves and LGBTQ students as this would require being out within the microsystem.	Outness is a unique component of queer identity that heterosexuals in our society do not have to confront. Likewise, sexual orientation identity development can be supported by mentors and allies. Only some participants were willing to participate in this role within the school environment.
4. Survival strategies and outlook to future: EJ chose to be an invisible advocate, maintaining control over outness while fighting from the shadows. TM and AJ took a middle-of-the-road approach to outness and cultural norms. RA and HM vowed to fight and stand up for themselves as confrontational advocate.	Differences in approach can be attributed to differences across microsystems (schools), mesosystems (supportive relationships), as well as individuals (i.e., gender).	Approaches differed in degree of resistance to heteronormative culture and expectations.

Final Discussion

Although this study focused on veteran LGBTQ educators in rural Southeast Georgia, there are broader implications, particularly in developing a positive school climate for all stakeholders regardless of sexual orientation. This study is a major contribution to the Southern school districts and society as a whole. Many in the rural South still shun and abhor homosexuality; thus, my findings may help people broaden their views toward LGBTQ teachers. School administrators may use these findings to create a more inclusive teaching and learning environment for the LGBTQ community and, in turn, improve student achievement. School leaders who sense negative attitudes among their teachers toward homosexuals can conduct training programs to teach inclusivity and reduce bias. Furthermore, administrators may develop school-level policies to prevent teacher harassment based on sexuality.

Participants of the study echoed the need for policies that use language inclusive of the LGBTQ community and develop a culture of inclusion in all aspects of their community's school and spiritual life. Wax, Colettti, and Ogaz (2018) asserted, “Rather than the individual or his/her relationships, it is the organization that has the strongest impact on whether an employee decides to disclose his/her sexual orientation at work or not” (p. 23).

Despite recent advances in the equal treatment for LGBTQ individuals, namely marriage equality, LGBTQ educators in the Southeast Georgia school district continue to fear harassment and feel less secure in their jobs. Participants endured homophobic harassment, language, and microaggressions. South Georgia’s rural conservative culture continued to compound the feelings of isolation and fear for these LGBTQ educators. Participants condemned the traditional Southern conservative Christian values as an antigay exosystem influence on the school or microsystem. Establishing a school community with mutual respect for diverse religious beliefs

is a continuing problem for public schools tasked to create a positive school climate for all stakeholders. In rural Southeast Georgia, this is especially difficult given the pervasiveness of conservative Christian values and opposition to same-sex relationships. However, the inclusion of LGBTQ educators within approved Christian clubs and district- or school-wide prayers is a positive step.

Another key finding was the fear that LGBTQ educators would or could not receive school and district leadership protection from homophobic harassment by parents and community members. Participants felt a disconnect with the LEA, which they correctly perceived to have the power to make positive change and protect LGBTQ educators. However, LGBTQ educators felt marginalized by district leaders and school administrators unwilling to acknowledge the lack of protection and vulnerability of their population. Creating a policy that expressly included sexual orientation and gender identity within the organization's equal employment policy is a small but essential step in recognizing LGBTQ educators' contributions to the district.

Another finding of this study was the strategies used by veteran LGBTQ educators within the rural Southeastern school district. LGBTQ educators developed strategies throughout their careers to excel and establish themselves as integral members of the district's team of professional and dedicated educators. Strategies included finding a small department or group within the system to escape and be invisible, thus removing themselves from the homophobic harassment and microaggressions inflicted by those in the heteronormative majority. Second, LGBTQ educators navigated a middle path between supportive faculty, coworkers, and people hostile to LGBTQ individuals and issues. An ongoing probe of coworkers' views on politics, religion, and connections with other LGBTQ friends or family members helped to establish safe

networks while avoiding or remaining closeted against hostility. Finally, LGBTQ educators used coming out to faculty and students as a strategy. Educators, especially those married with children and families, found it beneficial to step out and openly advocate for themselves.

The use of LGBTQ-inclusive language by school administrators and staff in conjunction with professional development on the LGBTQ minority is an effective way to create a positive school and work environment for all stakeholders. According to the GaDOE (2020) LKES Fact Sheet, "Leaders are able to judge the effectiveness of teaching and serve as role models for expected behaviors of school staff" (p. 8). District leaders and school administrators can model LGBTQ-responsive expectations and set the example for faculty, staff, and students. For example, schools within the Southeast Georgia school district have faculty Christmas parties. LGBTQ educators voiced a willingness to take part in school activities and socials. Extending an invitation that welcomes LGBTQ faculty and their spouses or significant others acknowledges their worth to the institution by the principals responsible for their supervision. Despite the potential positive influence regarding the establishment of GSAs within the district and interest from students, the district had yet to establish an effective GSA. LGBTQ educators have noted that taking such a step confirms the district leadership's commitment to establishing equal treatment of LGBTQ students and educators.

The LGBTQ faculty in this study had never been the focus of any plan to create a diverse workforce of educators. Diversity within the school system has centered around racial and ethnic groups. The United States continues to struggle with the equal treatment of its descendants of slavery 56 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. LGBTQ educators have only recently received the right to marry the person they love and start a family. Despite this and other victories, they still struggle for equality and acceptance.

Implications and Discussion of the Study

In this study, I focused on the experiences of five successful veteran LGBTQ educators working in a rural Southeast Georgia school district. My goal was to understand better their life and career experiences as LGBTQ educators, their perceptions of homophobia or harassment, and strategies used to manage their careers. Participants of this study provided insights into the experiences and sacrifices of LGBTQ educators within rural Southeast Georgia, potentially creating a map for similarly located school districts and their communities to develop an improved school climate for their LGBTQ educators. Professional development should be an ongoing process targeting school personnel and leadership to provide an inclusive environment for LGBTQ educators (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). Therefore, may participants provide professional learning communities with an in-depth understanding of how LGBTQ educators navigate a socially conservative rural South Georgia school climate. The findings lend further insight for creating professional development and cultural competency training for teachers and teacher leaders to better support and retain veteran LGBTQ faculty members.

School leaders and teachers can use this study to create an inclusive culture for LGBTQ teachers and students. As LGBTQ lifestyles gain recognition and acceptance in the United States, schools are increasingly understanding the importance of inclusivity. My research findings provide the lived experiences of LGBTQ teachers vital to the creation of an inclusive culture.

Young LGBTQ teachers may use this study as a useful guide to navigate the school system and mitigate potential threats to their professional wellbeing. The clear voices of LGBTQ teachers may help them understand the organizational cultural dynamics within schools. I believe that informed teachers prepare their thought process to help bring about change. I also believe

this study is beneficial to LGBTQ teachers at a personal and professional level. At a personal level, they understand the empowerment associated with coming out, and at a professional level, they can grow as educators. Based on the assertive lesbian teachers in this study, teachers who are out tend to focus more on their work and are more productive. I hope my study will help spread awareness of LGBTQ educators in the workplace and the community. This understanding is especially significant in a rural Southern context where people who identify as LGBTQ face frequent discrimination and ostracization.

Four major themes emerged from the data in this study: (a) LGBTQ identity/fear of community, (b) LGBTQ identity/school relationships, (c) teacher-student relationships/to be or not to be out, and (d) survival strategies and outlook to future. Research Question 1 was, What are the life and career experiences of identified LGBTQ veteran educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district? The themes reflected the life and career experiences and challenges of veteran LGBTQ educators living and working in rural Southeast Georgia. The examination focused on participants' perceptions of school climate via their experience facing homophobia and/or homophobic harassment from systemic influences by the community, district and school leadership, and at school from faculty, staff, and students. The findings are consistent with previous research findings showing that LGBTQ educators, students, and community members residing in Southeast Georgia continue to experience homophobic harassment and heteronormative microaggressions (Bone, 2015; Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Fetner et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015).

Limitations of the Study

The purposeful selection of participants represented successful LGBTQ educators living and working in rural Southeast Georgia and best suited to answer the research questions, a

necessity indicated by Maxwell (2013). Five veteran LGBTQ educators who met the following selection criteria were selected to participate in this study: at least five years' teaching experience, self-reported positive relationships and summative TKES evaluations of Level III or above, and affiliation with the identified Southeast Georgia school system. The study sample comprised of three gay men, one of whom was married, and a bisexual woman and a lesbian, both of whom were in same-sex marriages. The teaching experience of the five participants ranged from six to 26 years.

Transferability is a possible limitation of this study. Based on the small sample size, it is not feasible to generalize study results in a broader context. However, I provided thick, rich description that enhanced the transferability of findings to contexts with similar characteristics, such as sample, settings, times, or institutions (Maxwell, 2013). The limited participant selection criteria of veteran LGBTQ educators with five or more years' experience and annual TKES evaluations of Level III or more reduced the internal transferability to other LGBTQ educators within the setting. Additionally, all participants were White, which excluded minority experiences from the study. Because participant selection was limited to one Southeast Georgia school district, the study may not be representative of the broader population of LGBTQ educators' in larger and urban locations.

The data collection process spanned the summer and fall of 2019; data analysis extended into January and February 2020, making for eight months of collection and analysis. The purpose of this study was to determine if identified LGBTQ veteran faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. The collection of interview data was through three face-to-face interviews that followed

Seidman's (2013) three-step interview process. The participants chose the sites for all three interviews, each undergoing audio recording and transcribing. Participants' reluctance to speak freely during the interviews was another possible limitation of the study (Patton, 2002). My presence or audio recording could have impacted the participants' responses (Maxwell, 2013).

In addition, researcher bias and reactivity may have posed further limitations to this study. Maxwell (2013) outlined researcher bias and reactivity as two main threats to qualitative research validity. Researcher bias can occur when a researcher selects data that fit preexisting theories, goals, or preconceptions or otherwise stand out to the investigator (Maxwell, 2013). I used memos to expand on interview notes, as Seidman (2013) suggested, allowing me to establish follow-up questions to clarify and ensure the participants' intentions. I provided each participant with a transcript and solicited feedback with the presumption that all feedback was truthful and precise; regardless, I cannot rule out inaccuracies by the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

According to Maxwell (2013), reactivity is the researcher's influence on the setting or individual participants. The eradication of the researcher's influence is impossible; thus, the goal of a qualitative study is "not to eliminate this influence but to understand it and to use it productively." (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125). Therefore, I used open-ended questions and made a conscious effort not to share my opinions or experiences during the interview process.

Finally, in this study of LGBTQ educators,' the main limitation was the sensitive nature of rather intimate issues about individuals' private lives. I cannot rule out the possibility of exaggerations and/or omissions in what they chose to tell.

Recommendations for Future Research

I identified several possible research opportunities through the process of data analysis. Expanding the sample to include a larger geographic area or regional education service area could strengthen the findings and conclusions. Second, because participants' insecurity resulted from their distrust, assumptions, and experiences with community members and parents, future researchers could examine the perception of LGBTQ educators held by parents and community leaders living in rural South Georgia communities. Third, a study that focuses on understanding the strategies used by school and district leaders to address LGBTQ issues within rural schools could provide rural districts with additional tools. School and district leaders could also create crowdsourced strategies, resources, policies, and procedures that address equal protections for rural LGBTQ educators and students. Regardless, continued research should focus on LGBTQ issues in rural South Georgia schools to promote dialogue, guide professional learning communities, and inform rural community-school partnerships, thus providing a cohesive approach to addressing LGBTQ inclusion and equality within the rural community.

Final Conclusions

According to the National Survey of Educators' Perceptions of School Climate, LGBTQ educators reported a negative school climate and feared harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). I explored the life and educational experiences of veteran LGBTQ educators working in a selected Southeast Georgia school district to determine if they feared harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status became known, and if they worked with this fear, what strategies they used to manage their careers. Few researchers have examined the LGBTQ educator and even less specific to LGBTQ educators within the rural South. Therefore, there is a need for research that addresses

the experiences of LGBTQ educators living and working in the rural South (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015; Shelton & Lester, 2018; Wright, 2009; Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019).

Veteran LGBTQ educators in one rural Southeast Georgia school district experienced homophobic language, harassment, ostracism, and physical assault during their K-12 education and extending into their careers as education professionals (Kosciw et al., 2016; Lineback et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2019). These findings appear against the backdrop of the GaDOE's efforts, through the inclusion of Standard 2 of LKES, to support all teachers in an open school climate that encourages sincere relationships among all stakeholders (GaDOE, 2020; McCarley et al., 2016). These educators reported harassment in the form of verbal insults from community members and students that included "faggot," "dyke," and "queer," among others. They also revealed subtle slights, such as ugly looks, failure to respond to a greeting, and ostracism by coworkers.

Furthermore, all participants, despite their rural Southern background, viewed Southern conservative culture as anti-LGBTQ (Boso, 2019; Kazyak, 2012). This revelation was especially evident given the participants' negative views of traditional Southern religious institutions, even amid their own deep-seated Christian convictions. Participants perceived the need to exercise care around people within the system or in the community who professed to ascribe to old-school, Church of God or otherwise strict, conservative religion as ultimately anti-LGBTQ (Barton, 2012; Baunach & Burgess, 2013; Kazyak, 2012).

It is evident from this study that when administrators appear sympathetic to LGBTQ issues, relationships with those administrators have a positive influence on LGBTQ educators (Wright & Smith, 2015; Wright et al., 2019). Participants viewed favorably individuals demonstrating positive relationships with LGBTQ children or family. Administrators who used

inclusive language and expressed concern for LGBTQ issues appeared to be possible allies. Conversely, the LGBTQ educators perceived administrators linked to strict, conservative religious values as less supportive. All participants also identified the lack of protections for LGBTQ individuals in Georgia as a source of concern. Participants viewed any admission by the school administration and LEA, written or verbal, as a positive force regarding their job security and protection from a homophobic community or parents.

All participants used some degree of strategic decision-making when choosing to come out to administration, faculty, and staff (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015). Female participants identifying as lesbian or bisexual were completely out. Coming out was harder for gay men, who still followed the strategies of avoidance, ambiguity, and deflection when deciding how much information to share past their marital and LGBTQ statuses (Barton, 2012; Baunach & Burgess, 2013; Kazyak, 2012). In terms of willingness to succeed as educators, most telling were the three gay male participants' strategic sacrifices to keep a separation between private life and teacher identity to protect themselves and their jobs (Sawyer et al., 2017). Participants lived outside the community represented by the Southeast Georgia school district to physically separate work and socialization. Furthermore, all participants reported going out of town to socialize or date. It was significant that AJ had avoided dating or any relationships with LGBTQ individuals for over four years to ensure his job within the district.

I want to use this study to empower five veteran LGBTQ educators living and working in one rural Southeast Georgia school district to share their experiences and strategies as successful LBGTQ educators in a rural Southern school district, helping to fill the literature gap. Aspiring and practicing principals, teacher leaders, district leaders, policymakers, and leadership preparation programs may glean from this study practical information to create a holistic

approach to improve the safety, security, and job satisfaction of LGBTQ educators. This may be accomplished through improving leadership development, creating teacher retention plans, and developing local and state policies and procedures to address school climate for all LGBTQ educators and the students they serve.

I recommend that administrators use inclusive language in all aspects of school and community life, providing LGBTQ educators with the needed verbal or written assurance of evaluation and retention based solely on their teaching ability. I found that LGBTQ educators in rural Southeast Georgia want evaluations and protections equal to their heterosexual coworkers. Administrators and faculty members should take a proactive approach to understand the sacrifices made by LGBTQ educators living and working throughout rural South Georgia. Furthermore, LGBTQ educators feel that providing LGBTQ students with resources and support that includes education and communication between all stakeholders will benefit LGBTQ educators and students. For me, as a heterosexual, cisgender male educator, my work on this study illuminated the depth to which LGBTQ educators sacrifice part of their personal and professional lives to serve the educational needs of South Georgia's K-12 student population.

My Takeaway

Federal laws designed to protect people from workplace discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, religion, sex, age, and disability do not cover LGBTQ educators. These teachers often find themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs on the basis of sexual orientation despite Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. Teachers are discouraged from engaging in legal battles against their employers for two main reasons: prohibitive cost and the fact that laws do not change the perceptions of individuals, including the school's stakeholders (teachers, administrators, students, and parents), toward

LGBTQ teachers. In this study, the influence of religion and community overpowered the school district's culture.

School district leaders at the heart of this study do not provide an inclusive culture for LGBTQ teachers. They may be afraid of harming their reputation by hiring homosexuals, an act in direct societal conflict with local traditions and values. This situation, in turn, creates an intolerable work climate that eventually forces some teachers to quit their jobs.

Finally, although some teachers, administrators, and students embrace LGBTQ teachers, others do not have relationships with LGBTQ individuals and harbor negative attitudes toward them. Although federal laws have given LGBTQ individuals some freedom, the attitudes of different co-teachers, administrators, parents, and students depend on many personal and professional factors, which often perpetuate the social taboos used over the years to discriminate against LGBTQ people.

It was interesting to note that heterosexuals tend to have more negative attitudes toward homosexuals of their own sex than the opposite sex. Male participants reported that coworkers and administrators were more negative toward homosexuals of their own sex. Wienke and Hill, (2013) argued that same-sex homosexuals are presumably more threatening. I was intrigued by coworkers and administrators who expressed hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ teachers while also endorsing traditional ideologies of family, sexuality, and sex roles. These findings underscore the complex nature of attitudes toward LGBTQ people that characterizes the climate of these schools.

"If you are not personally free to be yourself in that most important of all human activities . . . the expression of love . . . then life itself loses its meaning."

—Harvey Milk

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APPENDIX A

Participant Consent Agreement

Dear Participant,

My name is Chanc Logue and I am currently a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. In order to complete the requirements of my degree, you are being invited to participate in a study examining LBGTQ educators' perceptions of school climate.

The purpose of this study is to determine if identified veteran LGBTQ faculty members working in a selected South Georgia school district fear being harassed and fired if their LGBTQ status was known and if they worked with this fear what strategies they have used to manage their careers.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and confidential. No identifiable information regarding the district, school, or staff will be reported or published. All identifiable information regarding the district, school, and staff will be only seen by the principal researcher of this study.

Eligibility for the Study:

1) Participants must be at least 18 years of age.

2) Current public school teacher identifying as LGBTQ.

3) Former public school teacher identifying as LGBTQ, exiting the system within the last five years.

Interview Process

If selected for the study, each participant will be interviewed three times. Interviews will be designed to last from 60 to 90 minutes in order to allow in-depth questions to be asked. Each interview will be conducted away from the school at an agreed location offering comfort and privacy for each individual participant. Participants will be notified via e-mail with a list of days and times best suited for their participation in the interview process.

If you would like to participate in this study, please forward your contact information to me at jclogue@valdosta.edu.

Questions regarding the purpose and procedures of the research should be directed to Chanc Logue at jclogue@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu

Sincerely,

Chanc Logue

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide and Questions

Interview 1: Life and Educational Experience. During the first session, the participants will be asked to reconstruct past experiences with personal education and entry into the education profession to gather data regarding their present worldviews.

RQ1: What are the life and career experiences of veteran LGBTQ educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district?

1. Describe for me your background. How would you describe yourself?
2. What was your K-12 experience?
3. Describe for me how living and teaching in rural South Georgia has impacted you and your approach to teaching.
4. How would you describe your community?
5. Describe any directed or observed experience of homophobic comments or harassment during your K-12 education.
6. Tell me how and why you entered the teaching profession. Where have you worked?
7. Describe any meaningful impact you wish to make on students.
8. Describe your level of outness to coworkers, faculty, and students.
9. Explain the reasoning behind your level of outness or any cost-benefit analysis contained in the choice.

Interview 2: Perceived school climate and support. In the second interview, the participants will be asked to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences as an LGBTQ educators and perception of school climate in rural South Georgia.

RQ2: Do identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected rural South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination if their LGBTQ status becomes known?

RQ3: If identified LGBTQ educators working in a selected South Georgia school district fear harassment and termination, what strategies have they used to manage their careers?

Community

1. Describe any instances of homophobia or homophobic harassment from community members.
2. Describe how the community provides support or opposition to LGBTQ educators.
3. How does the community influence feelings of job security?
4. How does the community make you feel safe or unsafe?

Local Education Agency

1. Describe any instances of homophobia or homophobic harassment from LEA.
2. Describe how the LEA provides support or opposition to LGBTQ educators.
3. How does the LEA influence feelings of job security?
4. How does the LEA make you feel safe or unsafe within the school environment?
5. Describe your perception or experiences regarding LEA's acceptance of LGBT issues within the curriculum.

Administration

1. Describe any instances of homophobia or homophobic harassment from the administration.
2. Describe how the administration provides support or opposition to LGBTQ educators.
3. How does the administration influence feelings of job security?
4. How does the administration make you feel safe or unsafe within the school environment?

5. Describe your perception or experiences regarding the administration's acceptance of LGBTQ issues in the curriculum.

Faculty

1. Describe any instances of homophobia or homophobic harassment from faculty.
2. Describe how the faculty provides support or opposition to LGBTQ educators.
3. How does the faculty influence feelings of job security?
4. How does the faculty make you feel safe or unsafe within the school environment?
5. Describe your perception or experiences regarding faculty's acceptance of LGBTQ issues within the curriculum.

Students

1. Describe any instances of homophobia or homophobic harassment from students and parents.
2. How do students and parents influence feelings of job security?
3. How do students and parents influence make your feelings of safety within the school environment?
4. Describe your perception or experiences of students' and parents' acceptance of LGBTQ issues within the curriculum.

Interview 3: Will address reflection of and perceived steps to positively increase the school climate for LGBTQ educators and students.

Perception of what can be improved.

1. Reflecting on experiences within the field of education that you have shared, how do you see possible improvements for LGBTQ educators and students within your and other rural schools and districts of South Georgia?

2. Specifically, in your experience, how can administration better support and increase the number of LGBTQ educators?
3. Specifically, in your experience, how can the administration better support LGBTQ students and provide more local resources?
4. How do you see your role changing in the future to help address LGBTQ issues in your district's rural schools of South Georgia?
5. Describe any opportunities to mentor LGBTQ students.
6. Describe any willingness or reluctance to the mentorship of LGBTQ students.
7. Describe any formal or informal groups that address LGBTQ issues within the school district, community, or individual school.
8. How do you view the inclusion of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at your school or system?

APPENDIX C

Institutional Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 03843-2019 **Responsible Researcher:** James Chanc Logue

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Rudo Tsemunhu

Project Title: *LGBT Educators' Perception of School Climate.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Exempt protocol guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recorded interviews. All recordings **must be deleted immediately** from the recording device, upon creation of the interview transcript.*
- *Upon completion of this research study all data (surveys, data list, email correspondence, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researchers for a minimum of 3 years.*
-

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth Ann Olphie *06.11.2019*
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 08.02.16